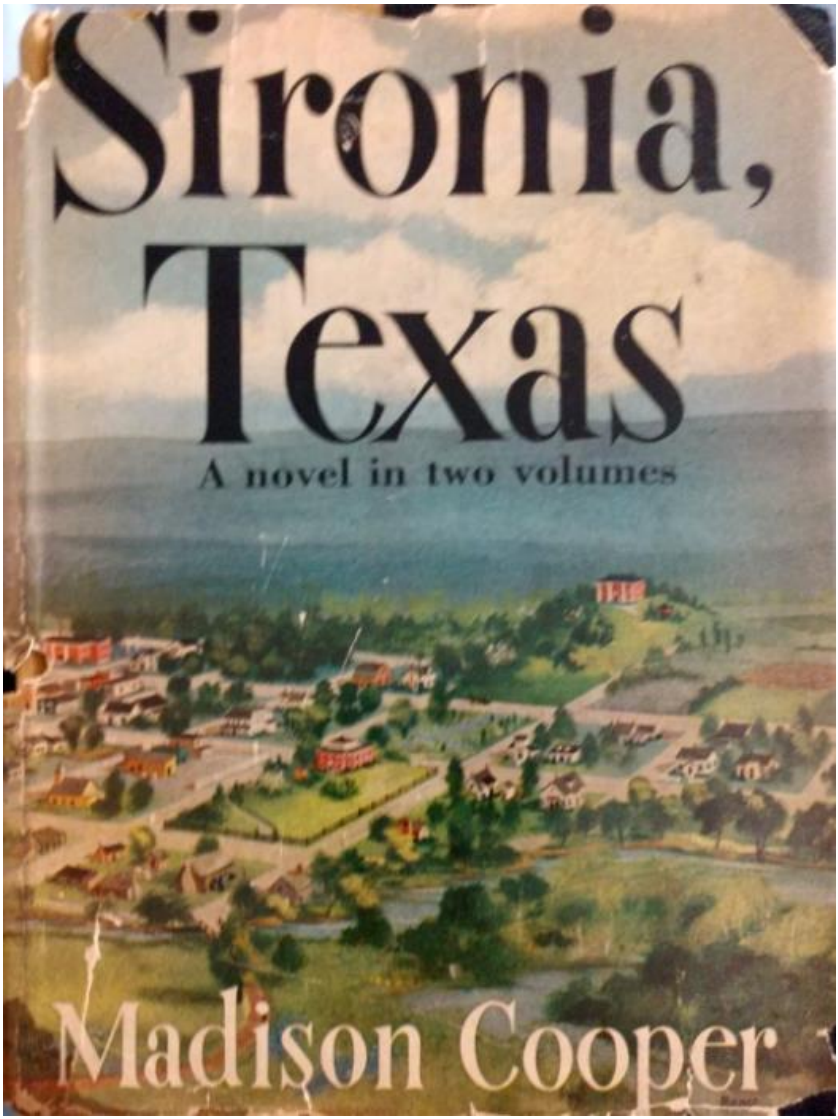
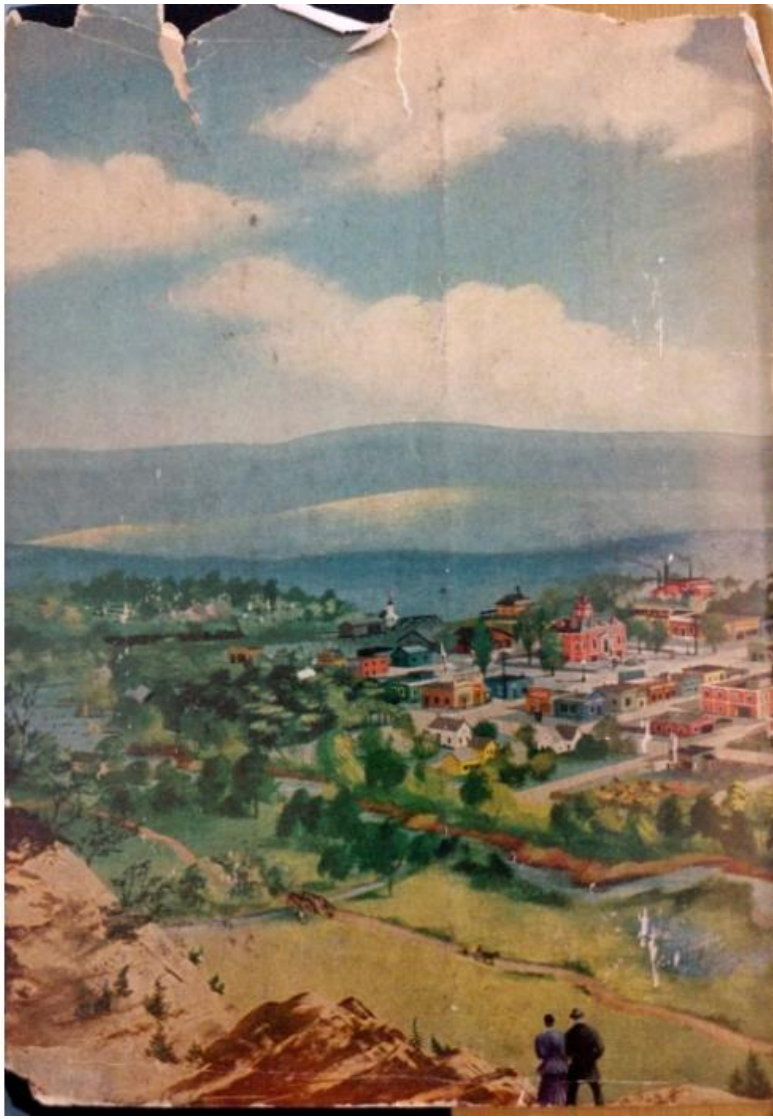
Sironia, Texas

A novel in two volumes



Madison Cooper



2 Vo

Sironia, Texas

by MADISON COOPER

Sironia, Texas, is a very special place, but it is, in a sense, every American town big or little. The people who live there are your neighbors; some of them you will love, some of them you will laugh at, and some of them you will hate, but all of them you will learn to understand as you grow to know them intimately. What happens to them between 1900 and 1921, is what happens when America grows up. It's a big story, filled with humor and heartache, with violent growing pains and the wildness of youth.

Texas is not all given over to cattle and oil wells, for Sironia lies in rolling farm country and is, like Rome, built on hills. It is a gay town, a party town, a society so closely knit that everyone knows everyone else and so rigidly stratified that everyone knows his place.

continued on back flap

Jacket by William Barss

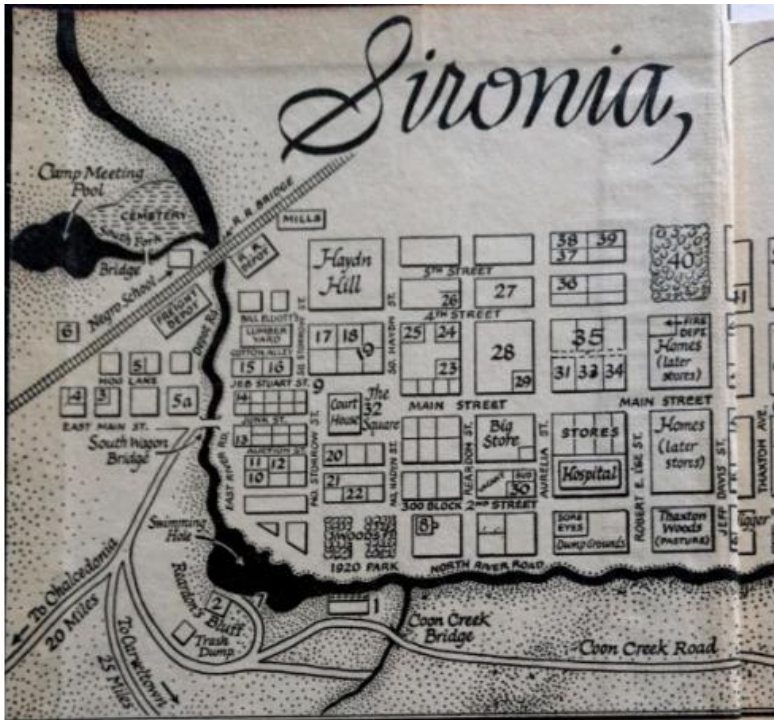
continued from front flap

There are the "Hill Families," descendants of the town's founder, who live on the heights and rule Sironia through an unwavering belief in their own divine right. There are poor relations who live on the fringe of greatness. There are the newcomers who, however prosperous or ambitious, remain upstarts. And there are the Negroes, whose world lies in the shadow of the white world.

Especially, there is Tam Lipscomb who falls hopelessly in love with a daughter of the royal lines, just as his father did years before. Tam and Nelia have grown up together, gone to the same schools, played in the same back yards. But neither of them can ever quite forget that she is a Hadyn and that his mother once worked as a maid in the Hadyn house.

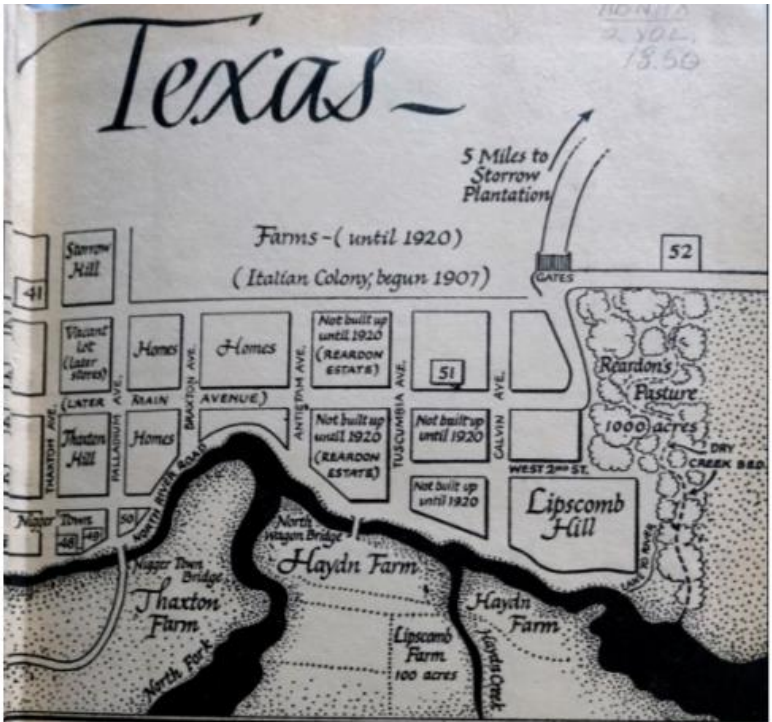
Behind the formal facade of Sironian tradition you will find violence and passion and tragedy. You will also find courage and kindness and the warm, homely details that go to make up most of life in any American town.

Here is a novel too great in scope to be classified. It is not a story of the struggle between the Old and the New South or a family saga or the chronicle of a town or a love story. It is all these things and more. For above all, here is narrative writing at its best. Madison Cooper is a master storyteller.



LEGEND

1 Syringa Manor (Alpheus Reardon's home)
2 Lipscomb Cabin
3 "Little" Baptist Church
4 Timkins Home
5 Milt Temple
5a Negro Skating Rink
6 Rasczik Home
7 Devil's Pantry
8 Early Lipscomb Home
9 Diego's Location
10 Negro Undertaker
11 Negro Movie
12 Louella's Place
13 The Lollipop
14 The Blacksmith Shop
15 Warehouse
16 Plant of the Sironia "Sentinel"
17 White Skating Rink
18 Hazel Elliott
19 American Legion (Upstairs)
20 The Post Office
21 White Undertaker
22 "222"
23 Ward School
24 Baptist Church
25 Library
26 Methodist Church
27 High School (in early days the only school)
28 Business College (upstairs)
29 Bank
30 Bingham, Mule barn & lot
31 Café
32 Stone basin for statue
33 Haydn Opera House (later Paradise Cinema)
34 Haley's Drug Store
35 Small Stores
36 Miss Jewel Kerens' Home



37 Lane Home
38 Squds Bingham's Home
39 Judge Rogan Home
40 Storrow Wood. – (Later a park)
41 Home of Miss Nathalia and Trina Storrow (Later Ruth's Book and Gift Shop)
42 Pessels' Home
43 Boarding House – (later site of Hotel Sironia)
44 Stores
45 Gethsemane Chapel
46 Blank
47 Mammy Henderson's Cabin
48 Melissa's Cabin
49 Josie's Cabin
50 Negro Preacher's Home
51 Bill Elliott Home in 1900 (later bought by Thorntons')
52 Blues Chaser (Honky-Tonk and Beer Joint)

S
E W
N

SCALE
Approximately 1 MILE

Sawyer Hill
41
42
43
Vacant Lot (Later stores)
(LATER
MAIN
MAIN STREET
44
45
THAXTON AVE.
Thaxton Hill
PALLADIUM
Homes
Nigger Town
47
48
49
50
NORTH RIVER
Nigger
Thax
Farm
Creek Road
North
37 Lane Home
38 Spuds Bingh

As drawn by Nelia from data given —

Eliphalet Storrow (1775–1810) (Founded Storrow Plantation in 1800) — Married....

Eliphalet Storrow II (1795 – 1875)

Rene Leloux (1800–1850)

Gen. Hugh Storrow (1798 – 1861)

Julia Reardon (1802 – 1852)

Gen. Pluto Hayden (1799 – 1889)

Alphus Storrow (1820 – 1885)

Miss Nathalie Storrow (1854 —)

Chysie Storrow (1840 – 1861)

* Sivonia Reardon Storrow (1837 – 1893)

Col. Leonidas Storrow (1850 – 1872)

Clymatis Hayden (1852 – 1869)

Tom Bly (Owner) (1835 – 1899)

Aisla Jacobs (1844 – 1890)

2nd marriage 1911

1st marriage - 1873

Timon Hicks

Infant daughter died with mother 1861

Brig. Gen. Cunctatus Cahoon

Hazel Bly (1865 —)

Young Tom Bly (1859 —)

Sixtus Storrow (1848 – 1896)

Webley Storrow (1850 — 1894)

Beauregard Cuthaven Hicks (1854 —)

Odin Storrow

Bill Elliott (1860 —)

Rosaline Clanton (1851 — ?)

Carietta Cahoon (1857 —)

Sallie James (1870 —)

No Issue

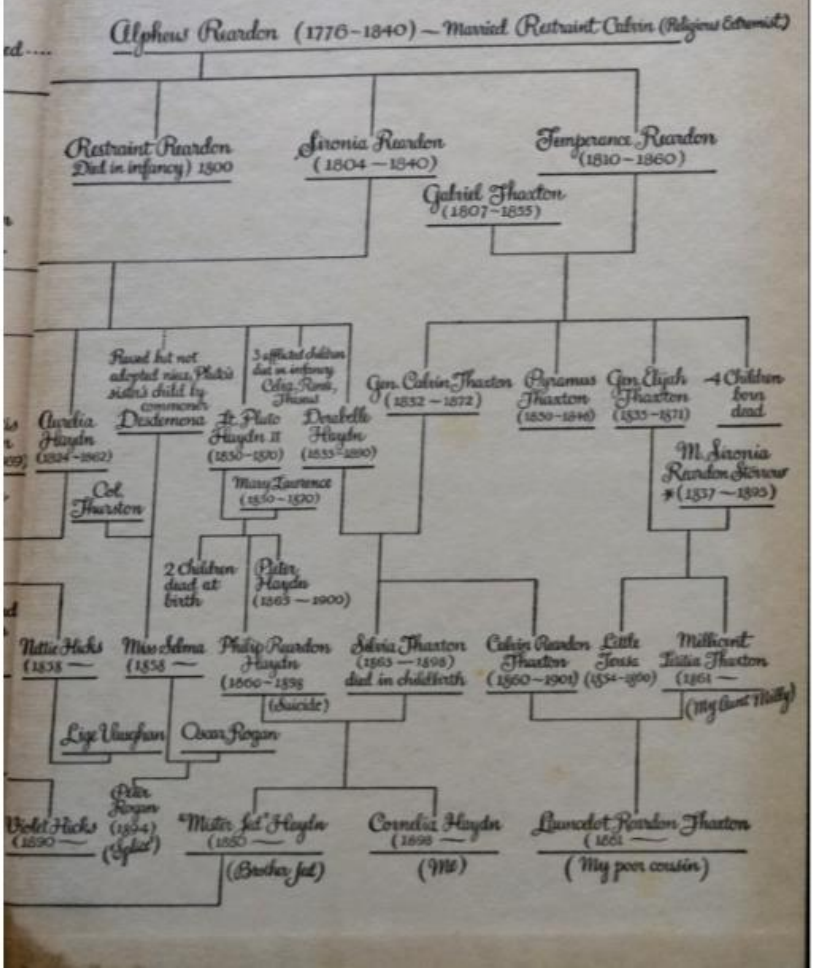
Trina Storrow (1882 —)

* Aunt Milly didn't tell me about this but I found out anyway

Charles Storrow (1895 —) (Cousin Charlie)

Bessie Hicks (1898 —)

n - by Mrs. Millicent Thaxton about 1906



Sironia, Texas

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME I

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN LITERARY FELLOWSHIP AWARDS

To E. P. O'Donnell for *Green Margins*
To Jenny Ballou for *Spanish Prelude*
To Robert Penn Warren for *Night Rider*
To Clelie Benton Huggins for *Point Noir*
To Dorothy Baker for *Young Man with a Horn*
To David Cornel DeJong for *Old Haven*
To Maurine Whipple for *The Giant Joshua*
To Mary King O'Donnell for *Quincie Bolliver*
To Helen Todd for *A Man Named Grant*
To A. Fleming MacLeish for *Cone of Silence*
To Donald MacRae for *Dwight Craig*
To Joseph Wechsberg for *Looking for a Bluebird*
To Ann Petry for *The Street*
To Beatrice Griffith for *American Me*
To Elizabeth Bishop for *North & South*
To Helen Mears for *Mirror for Americans, Japan*
To Arthur Mizener for *The Far Side of Paradise:* A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald
To Anthony West for *The Vintage*
To Fred Ross for *Jackson Mahaffey*
To Rebecca C. Patterson for *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*
To Madison A. Cooper, Jr., for *Sironia, Texas*

BY MADISON COOPER

Sironia, Texas

VOLUME I

Decorations by William Barss

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON
The Riverside Press Cambridge

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE SOURCES of numerous incidents herein will be recognized by friends. All characters are fictional, written and re-written to meet story needs until they have become very real indeed to the author. Sironia, itself, is a composite of many Texas towns of thirty to fifty years ago. Most of what happens and is thought herein could have happened or been thought *then* — but not now. If similarity there be between these Sironians and any person living or dead, it is coincidence only. Nor is there anything here which can rightly cause anyone embarrassment or concern.

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To

Martha Roane Cooper

and

Madison A. Cooper

Book One

Thaxton Hill

CHAPTER I

HAD MARSHALL LIPSCOMB suspected Bill Elliott's real purpose, he would not now be bathing to go out into chill November of 1900 dusk. When anything was against *her,* Marshall was against *it.*

The only light in the large, simply overfurnished room came from a new, pink-globed kerosene lamp on white onyx base, ornately brassed. And brassily it vaunted its newness from round, just-laid dining table beside old wood cookstove. Illuminated brightly on the wall behind it was a framed print of "The Good Shepherd" in rank blues and pinks. Catholic colors, Marshall, a Baptist, called them — but not where Moira, now a Baptist, too, could hear.

Tammas Abercrombie Lipscomb, their only child (whose story this chiefly is), was already seated at the table. Between chubby Tam and his chair was Webster's Unabridged Dictionary — of no other use here. He knew Pop must be got off up yonder to "Suicide Bluff" before Mama ("Mommer") and he could eat. The grits, fried ham and

fried eggs combined their fragrances to grow more tantalizing by the second. Too, there was "a surprise for a good boy" hidden by a tin dish on the back of the stove. Fretting to get at it hadn't helped, a reminiscent tingling of firm little bottom reminded him.

Liveoak embers in the open brick fireplace which took up half the opposite wall gave out whiffs of bitter hickory and pecan. These mingled with smells of food and the steaming bathwater. In Mama's largest washtub full of hot water, a steaming Pop and homemade lye soap smelled strongest of all. Mama had complained, "'Tain't fitting for a man to wash himself all public this way." Pop had laughed—deep and gurgly. Mama complained it was because he wanted to show off his big red body. He said it was because their bedroom (added to what had been a one-room cabin) was cold enough "to freeze 'em off a brass monkey!"

"Where's the brass monkey? I wanter play with—!"

"Now see, Mister Lipscomb! Just some more of Pop's foolishness, Tammy." As much Irish in her talk as in her dark beauty. "*You* ought to be ashamed!" Pop kept on laughing. Tam was sure he'd said something smart, began to show off, got a soft slap from Mama.

Pop knew they liked to watch him. He was more fun naked than any other time, played and joked more. Sometimes he ran around on all fours, barking and nibbling at Tam's drawn-up feet. Mama was the one who frowned, gave orders and waved elm switches. "Oo-oo-ee—look at them muscles!"

"Those muscles, Tam!" Pop corrected sternly, but pleased, too.

"What time you going to get in tonight, Mister Lipscomb?" She waited just a second or two. "I asked you a polite question, and I expect a polite—"

"Wife of my bosom!" Almost the color of Mama's dark red cotton challis dress, a smoking giant stood up. The tin washtub's bottom plunked loudly. Great chest was expanded, washrag squeezed so that misty suds ran down him all the way. Foamy white-against-red swept wiry black hairs downward in its flow. "Usual time—if Bill gets to go. You know Hazel! Might decide to lock him up again in 'The Elliot Hotel.' Never can tell about wives, I always say."

"Hmph!" There was light contempt in the low grunt. But great dark eyes were asparkle already. She'd get all the news of folks she wasn't good enough for out of him before morning. "Fine way for respectable married men to be spending a Saturday night, I must say. And the way I'm treated in this house is—"

"Moira! Not before the boy."

Mama shut up—for once. Angrily she wiped back strands of what Pop called her "horsetail hair," long and black and coarse and, to Tam, beautiful. When she spoke again, it was sullenly. "The ham-

per's all ready. How you three can eat all them steaks at one setting is more'n I can — "

"*Those* steaks, Mama!"

"*You* shut up. See — got my own flesh and blood making fun of me."

"Come, come, Moira, me dar-rling." At his mimicry of her brogue, she turned away an unwilled grin. "Sure and ye've been a good gur-rl, Moira, to fix the lunch and all. Now ye can claim ye ree-war-rd — ye can dry me back."

"Wouldn't touch the slimy thing." Even as she spoke dark red skirt folds were set swinging. She fetched another flour-sack towel from the lean-to room. With vigor and poorly concealed delight, she wiped brutally hard up and down and across all that boiled meat. It cooled slowly to a flushed pink. Sure and a beautiful thing, a terrible thing it was to love the man like this. And him not caring a whit. She didn't know what all it might make her do. (Poor Moira — she couldn't know.)

The drying finished, as an extra "treat" Pop was now allowing her to trim his toenails. She objected, got at it, never paused doing it. Tam lay back in his chair pretty much disgusted with parents. He fixed speculative eyes again on "the surprise," decided it was a dough-man. Goody! Fidgeting about on the dictionary, he searched the room for something else to wonder about.

In what Marshall still called "the cabin" (Moira more correctly "the cottage"), this room might be called almost anything. It served as kitchen, dining room, living room and on very cold nights bedroom, too. The gable-space overhead was where Tam had been supposed to sleep since pinkish baby-hair had darkened to its permanent reddish brown. He had not minded the nightly banishment, since more often than not he slid back down the narrow ladder in a far corner to creep in between his parents within minutes after he'd been paddled affectionately up to bed. Pop shamed him about it. "Five years old and afraid to sleep in a room by yourself." Mama didn't like Pop's teasing him.

Mama didn't like *anything* about their house. She never let a chance slip (Pop said) to get in something like: "It's a shame, that's what it is: the richest merchant in Sironia, just last year elected 'Sironia's most valuable citizen for eighteen-ninety-nine' — hmmph! — keeping his family in a pigsty!" It didn't look like any pigsty Tam had ever seen. At times like that, Pop was the one that shut up, times when Mama said she knew only too well why he kept them here — only she never said why when Tam asked her.

Now the nail-trimming was finished. She was helping Pop, tying navy tie, holding dark blue suit and overcoat. In just a minute he'd

be gone up to Reardon's Bluff with "his fine friends who don't want anything to do with you and me, Tammy." Then would come supper. After supper and the dishwashing, she would hold him close beside her for stories all mixed up with a whole heart's outpouring. (Often, as a man, Tam was to hear facts, supposedly for the first time, which were neither new nor strange to him, facts which explained things he hadn't understood when they happened to him.)

Main Street ran from Sironia's Court House Square due west more than a mile before it became lost in cedared, limestone confusion. This was known as Reardon's Pasture. It no longer belonged to anyone named Reardon, hadn't for years, and had never been much of a pasture. Nor was "The Elliott Hotel" a hotel.

Hazel was getting her way. For that best of all possible reasons, all was peaceful between the two Elliotts in their second-floor bedroom.

Bill Elliott was buttoning gray flannel outing shirt over woolen long underwear. With a flip its tail snapped down snug into well-worn brown corduroy waistband. Wide, square and freckled, his good-humored face under naturally crimped rust-red was both deeply amused ("tickled," he'd have said) and exasperated. With his "old lady," of course.

That little gnome's pink merino wrapper was in constant conflict with her thin, dry hair of almost exactly the same red as Bill's. She sat tailorwise, cross-legged on the foot of their bird's-eye maple bed. Enormous, when shared with Bill, there were times when it seemed a little narrow. Sitting like this at thirty-five, not in the least comfortable, was to help curb his annoying habit of addressing her as "Old Lady." She'd succeeded in weeding a lot of things out of him in the last ten years. That one she hadn't. However—

Bill slipped into a mismatching corduroy coat. This was reserved for these Reardon Bluff (often called "Suicide Bluff") gatherings with Marshall Lipscomb and Calvin Thaxton. Strongly Hibernian upper lip and muttonchops were betraying amusement more plainly. He could see the greenish-brown eyes in a mirror, watching every move he made. His skinny little hell-cat was, as the Negroes said, as "sot in her ways" as Mrs. Thaxton or Mrs. Storrow in theirs. He'd take his Hazel—any day. There had been a time when he'd thought the woman didn't live who could make him toe a line for ten years.

"Better let up, Old Lady—now that I'm whipped-down." That brought the acrid twitch to bony nose, enormous only in contrast with her thin face and freckle-framed squint eyes. "Or I'll get Pomphrey to blare-ass on over to Thaxton's to tell Calvin not to come by for me—say my wife's on another rampage."

Hazel sniffed loudly, both at his little obscenity and at his accusation. She wasn't rampaging and he knew it. He saw that his remark had served its purpose. She subsided into quiet, let him finish dressing in peace. Good thing she didn't have any idea of what he was figuring on — for afterward.

Hazel was, as a matter of fact, looking quite amiable. She should, he grunted to himself. She had things going her way for fair — started her way, at least. This steak-fry of the three men at Marshall's shack up on the Bluff was really her doing. Calvin Thaxton would learn why soon enough, and so would Miss Milly, Bill hoped. Bill didn't like any such conniving as this, but it was what his Hazel had set her persnickety little heart on. That was enough for him, even if it meant displeasing Calvin and making Marshall mad.

Ever since their marriage for which she had given up so much, ugly, intense but somehow magnetic little Hazel had stood up for him. "Bill Elliott," she maintained, "might've been a roustabout that fell — or was thrown — off a circus train drunk at Sironia. But he's going to show certain parties around here some day." He had, too. This "abortion of a house" was but one way he'd shown those "parties."

He finished buttoning the corduroy coat. She straightened aching "pipestems" cautiously. Pink merino dressing gown trailed after her across thick tan carpet, heavily patterned in pink cabbages called roses and jungle-thick green vines, through far too much bird's-eye-maple furniture. She circled him, pausing to lay her cheek against his back. Thin arms went around thickening corduroy waist — tight. "All right, Bill, get it out of your system. Tell me I'm a fool to lay so much store by — "

He had turned in her tight hold and smothered her to him. He squeezed so hard her breath puffed between the buttons of his shirt and those of heavy underwear to stir thick red chest-hair. "Now, now, Old Lady." A woman had to have something to bother about especially when for some goddam reason she couldn't have any kids — ever. That one of theirs had got a head start on the preacher and they'd gone to the same old Negro midwife many another Sironia couple had with no such lasting results. He guessed Hazel setting her heart on all this he was trying to bring about was no harder to understand — easier to excuse — than when he had to have a cutthroat poker game, an all-out puking drunk or a woman — just any woman, it seemed, except his lawful, wedded wife. These thoughts merging with the happy sniffling against his chest swung him over to her side even more completely.

She bundled him up lovingly against the cold. He felt her eyes still on him — through the ecru net of one front door — as he began a brisk head-down, back-and-forth walk down by the iron jockey

hitching post at the Main Street curb. Hazel should be able to tell he was thinking. Friend Calvin was one in a million, a real man who was pure as a girl. Never thought of any woman except that icicle wife. Knew how Bill was, knew they were different, made allowances. It would be best to hurry up the return trip a little, take Marshall home first. Then Bill would get Calvin to let him out across the River instead of at home. Calvin wouldn't approve, but he wouldn't say a word to stop him.

The two niches in "Tuscan Valley" wallpaper held, in one a marble bust of General Alpheus Reardon and in the other, that of his wife, Restraint, founders of the so-called "Hill Families" over a hundred years before. Past them, as always erectly, Calvin Reardon Thaxton descended blue-carpeted spiral staircase in a manner — for him — almost furtive. Even in tan hunting canvas he was "well-groomed." This was a favorite expression of his wife's, one of her requirements, too. There were others. Light from the newel-post globe emphasized silken black hair and mustache, but more dark eyes, deep-set and honest, and most of all "The Thaxton Nose." Its thin, high arch and delicate nostrils, that young scamp Jed Hadyn had christened "The Noblest Roman of them all." All Thaxton men were handsome, tall and courtly. And understandably, if unfortunately, the Thaxton women usually "looked just like Thaxton men with dresses on." Impressive, even regal, they could never have been considered beautiful — except, of course, Miss Milly. Born of "Another Hill Family first-cousin marriage," she just didn't look like any Thaxton anybody'd ever heard of.

Reaching the last white-risered mahogany step, Calvin's eyes sought — hopefully — the fanlighted front exit. Flanked by sconced, unlighted candles, it seemed a long, long way off.

"Cal-vin?" Softly, musically it would have sounded to anyone who did not know Miss Milly. "May I have a word with you?"

"Two, if you like, my dear." Light laugh fell dismally short of success. He halted under the hallway's great unlighted chandelier for the duration of another of her potent silences. She sat at her eight-foot mahogany breakfront secretary in the library. Tentatively he cast a look toward the high front door.

"Cal-vin!"

He tossed soft, dark hat and dark overcoat on the hall's mammoth mahogany hatrack (stark, the light grays of "Tuscan Valley"), and passed through lofty folding doors to join her. Walled halfway up with dark-bound books "in the family" for years, the large room held, too, the darknesses of brown leather wallpaper, of dark green Aubusson carpet and crowded, ancient, oversize mahogany. Enormous oil

floor lamp's bead-fringed "Moorish" shade of pierced brass permitted little light to escape to reveal her handsomeness that had been loveliness. The small woman, graying at thirty-nine, seemed so helpless in Juliet robe of lavender cashmere. Helpless? Not Millicent Letitia Thaxton Thaxton!

She wanted Calvin to justify his leaving. At her best in letting others say all they had to say, she could then, sometimes by only a lift of exquisitely limned, still chestnut-brown eyebrows, dispose of every word of it in ruins, complete, irremediable. All right, he'd start things. "Getting colder," he addressed himself to the nineteen-year-old sitting and fixedly studying a tray of blown birds' eggs in almost complete shadow, "isn't it, Launcelot?"

"Yes, Father, as — as I was saying just the other day." Calvin's eyes became dark with pain. Their son's swung instinctively to Miss Milly. "Wasn't I, Mo-other?"

"Indeed you were, dear." Unnoticed went Lance's slight irrelevance. "It's uncanny how the boy notices everything, Calvin — the scientific mind. All scientists are — absent-minded, it's an established fact." Her smile of understanding for the boy did not last quite long enough, washed thin, then vanished. "The servants tell me you're going out again tonight, Calvin."

"I told you, too, dear — yesterday afternoon. Remember I came in, found you sitting on the floor of your room with paper scraps for miles around? You said you were thankful we weren't invited anyplace tonight, because you wanted to get started this once before Cousin Carietta gets wind of it and takes charge. I said that was fine, because Bill had said something about a little get-together — you do remember."

"I remember — a number of things."

That was all. She was waiting for him to speak, make just any justification that would give clue on which to — proceed. If he had learned anything from their almost twenty years of marriage, it was never to show he got her full meaning. If she just were not so — sincere in her conviction that there was only one correct view — her own. What the dickens was there to say that wouldn't give her the opening she awaited? He'd look at Lance's egg collection a moment, encourage the boy. Their boy — their shared delight — and *cross.*

"I'd better get started. I'm going by for Bill — "

"Naturally. Obviously none of my affair — but the way some men let their friends use them — !"

"Now, Milly. He or Marshall has come by for me many a time. Besides, I want to show him what a real span is — his grays can't touch our blood-bays."

"So I've heard — many times. Good night, then. Please be more quiet than you were last time. You came lumbering in like a — "

"I didn't know I—er—'lumbered.'"

"Launcelot," she ignored Calvin, "get Mother's little red book on Mother's bed table. About so big, honey. And red—dark red, dear. You know."

"Dark red—what, Mo-other?" The virile—but empty—sincerity of his face only sharpened the pain which coiled always close about her heart. ("Launcelot's is the chaste beauty of Hoffmans' 'Christ in the Temple'" had been one of Nanette Lane's few pleasant remarks, no one knowing then the ugliness that had prompted it.)

"Book, honey—little red book."

"Oh, I know."

"I'll be more quiet, Milly." Calvin regained something of his lost banker's-walk. He left fanlighted entrance and crossed wide, high-columned porch. The reins of a shiny "trap" were given him by Old Fred. Oldest and blackest of their Negro servants, he was more like a pensioner.

"Have yo'se'f a good time, Marse Calvin."

"Thanks, Fred. I always do." A shimmer of reflected light played across sleek, blood-bay rumps. "You've got them spruced up tonight." It hadn't seemed that thick-lipped grin could widen, but it did.

Calvin's slight clucking noise set the bays off in step. Cold air knifed at "The Noblest Roman," was drawn into his lungs like icy flame. He flicked the long-lashed whip although the bays were already at a clip more brisk than night driving warranted. He should slow down, but he could have his way in this, at least. He was acting badly, but a set-to with Milly always "tore him to pieces." His love had been enough for both of them as he had sworn it would be—hadn't it?

Calvin drove the high-stepping matched blood-bays west on Main toward "The Elliott Hotel." There was Bill, striding up and down in front, frosted breath just visible. A pleasant feeling of companionship enveloped Calvin, dimmed all regrets. These evenings were his only way of forgetting home and business at one and the same time.

The trap drew up with a sudden halt that swung Calvin forward almost to the whip socket. "Been waiting long?"

"Nope. I'm just nine-tenths frozen."

"I'd ought've waited." Both laughed deeply, genuinely. It wasn't, Calvin often thought, what it was that made a joke or happening funny nearly so much as whom a man was with. As deeply as he loved Milly, he couldn't recall ever having laughed heartily in her presence.

Getting the bays back in gait, he did not notice his companion's silence. Bill was thinking of what now lay stark before him. Now

would be the best time. Marshall's sympathies were well known—still it might be a little easier with him present. Marshall usually saw the commonsense side of things, but could he where Miss Milly was concerned? About to make the start, something inside said as plainly as he could have spoken himself: We'll both be feeling better after a couple of Marshall's steaks and two hours of poker. Wait. He released a gusty mist of relief.

The River came into view, faintly luminous, as unrippled as slate in its gaunt fringe of leafless willows on high sandbanks. "Ain't going by for Marshall?"

"Not tonight. He said it'd save time to meet at Niggertown Bridge." They passed the North Wagon Bridge and the junction of North Fork with the River. At the first glimpse of Niggertown Bridge, Bill could see Marshall waiting. Good thing he hadn't brought it up.

During the exchange of greetings, Marshall loaded the flat hamper in the trap seat which faced backward and climbed in beside it. Calvin's thought was voiced: "Niggertown's mighty quiet tonight. Don't seem more'n half lit up. Not even a good razor fight."

"Been that way lately. I ought to know—practically live in it." Marshall grasped metal "arms" as the span jumped ahead to cross the bridge. Their small hooves made real music on vibrant old planking. "Sironia ain't had a real mean nigger in five or six years. Don't seem to get that way like they used to. Moira thinks it's the schooling."

"Probably is." Bill laughed. "I never had any—and look at me."

"Afraid to—with Calvin driving." Marshall said dryly. The others laughed loudly. Calvin felt himself beaming inside. Words as commonplace as those made all three feel better than they'd felt—well, since the last one of their sessions up yonder.

"Want to see what the bays can do, boys?"

"Sure," from Bill at the same time as, "You-all tell me about it. I can't see a damn thing back here" from Marshall.

Light whip flicked and the high-strung team seemed to gather their haunches and spring. A furious drum of hooves pounded up the curving old clay road. Wind sliced right through thick clothing. Liquid ice ran from eyes and back above the ears. Noses grew numb, fingers, too. Bill's muttonchop whiskers tickled his ears.

"Wish I'd clocked that." Calvin brought the team to a halt for the steep climb to the top of the Bluff. The talk was brisk, as inconsequential as their laughter.

"If you don't pipe down, Bill," Calvin laughed even more loudly as they passed Syringa's lead-off, "your brother-in-law once-and-forever-removed might think you're drunk, might be right—and might not like it—"

"Lot of things the old buzzard don't like."

"Meaning you and Hazel?"

"That's right. Funny thing is — I can't say as I blame him. I did at first — but the more I think about it the surer I am I wouldn't want any sister of mine marrying something like — me."

"Well, now, that's downright noble of you."

"I mean it. Both Old Tom and Young Tom thought it was a daughter's bounden duty to do as *they* said, — like some others I could — "

"Well, anyhow, I take off my hat," Calvin ignored the implication, "to anybody who can come up as the Blys did in one generation. Even if the two never had an ounce of the milk-of-human-kindness between them."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Marshall defended.

"Thought you'd fallen off in Coon Creek. When did you start taking up for — "

"Just then. I know some things you two don't and I can't tell you. And I don't mean Old Tom's giving my father our Bluff cabin, either. And, anyhow, you Hadyns and Thaxtons and Storrows and *half*-Storrows had better stick together if you want to keep us Elliotts and Lipscombs and Rasczikis in our place. You know what Jed says: 'The muck shall inherit the earth.' "

"That little hellion." Calvin's laugh revealed affection for his young kinsman of whom the "Hill Families" expected so much.

A sharp cut through an open rustic gate brought them to Marshall's log cabin in its clearing at the edge of Reardon's Bluff. The moon had been waiting among black clouds. It swung now out in the open, presenting a whole silver world of a thousand chill blacks and grays. "Godamighty!" was Bill Elliott's sincere tribute.

As many times before, Bill hitched the team, Calvin let the check-reins down and Marshall took the food hamper into the cabin. For a moment the three of them wandered out to the edge of "Suicide Bluff" for a better view of the valley down below. Just barely did it resemble itself by daylight. The outstanding landmark was "The Devil's Pantry" — a vertical shaft of limestone which had split from the Bluff and leaned out to form a giant V. All of fifteen feet at the top, this narrowed to a base only a few feet *above* the River's flood stage. (Or so Marshall thought — then.)

"Phew!" Bill whistled. "Wonder how long ago the big split happened?"

"Some youngsters had a marshmallow roast up here one night last week. Had Moira and me as chaperons. The same questions about 'The Devil's Pantry' came up. Was it dynamited by the Yankees? Was it true that some giant prehistoric animal had done it? Laurine Lane said, 'Why worry? It's all B.S., anyhow.' The boys almost fell

over the edge. She knew something was wrong. 'Before Sironia, that means. What's so funny?' Either way, it was a good answer to Bill's question." Their response did not satisfy Marshall. "Things never sound funny when I tell them. But I can cook."

The enthusiastic agreement on this made up for the other. Bill inspected the great limestone segment more closely. "If that thing ever topples, it'll dam the whole River. And will *The Sironia Sentinel* have flood headlines then."

Marshall nodded. "I tried once to give it away. Told Oscar Rogan's stone-cutting outfit they could have it if they'd blast it out in sections and haul it away. Oscar thanked me kindly, damn his hide, said they had more limestone right on their own ground than they could get rid of in their lifetimes. I was right glad. Moira's kind of attached to it. She comes up here and just sets when things don't go to suit her."

"It's a good place." Calvin felt Marshall should not have dragged that out. "Don't suppose Sironia's ever had a 'maiden aunt' that didn't 'portray' it at least once in water color. And now that I come to think of it—I seem to remember one Milly did with you hiding most of the Devil's Pantry."

"How'd you tell which was which?" (It did beat all, Bill told himself again, how Marshall and the man who had finally got Millicent Letitia Thaxton could be the best of friends.) "But I got work to do." Marshall motioned the others aside with a sweeping arm gesture and went back in the cabin. Like most men proud of his camp cooking, he didn't want anybody else around. He was, however, more sociable come eating time and, especially, dishwashing time.

Bill and Calvin idled along the hundred-foot ledge. Big cedars kept the air still, almost warm by contrast with the cold ride. The first sparks flew up from the stone chimney of the two-room cabin. Marshall must have opened up the barbecue fire started that afternoon by one of his store Negroes in the big fireplace. From the edge of the Bluff, they looked out over all Sironia. Its original rectangle was defined by lines running from the "Big" Swimming Hole, almost directly beneath them, south a half-mile or so to Hadyn Hill; approximately the same distance west to Storrow Hill; then north to Thaxton Hill; and finally (to complete the lopsided rectangle) a little northeast back to the "Big" Swimming Hole. Bill wondered if Marshall would have made the success of Lipscomb's he had if he'd married Miss Milly. Probably not. Marshall wouldn't ever know it but he had been lucky to get Moira. Sure she was common, common as Bill himself. But she was a good-looking woman and had sure given Marshall a fine boy. What Bill himself wouldn't give for a kid like Tam! His Hazel was just too small everyplace. Lordy, how she'd

cried, even offered him a divorce. (Later—that was the best thing about Hazel: never knew what to expect from her—she had deliberately let her women friends think their childlessness was Bill's fault. And, while some knew different, he'd never denied her explanation. Not all Sironia, with its long-tongued living and its eternally prowling dead could take that away from—)

"I believe—" one of Calvin's hands gestured toward the valley, then shoved quickly back into warm pocket, "Sironia's finally got her claws into you."

"Yes—kind of." He was again sparring for delay. He wished Marshall would call them in to eat right now so he wouldn't—no, he didn't. This had to be got over with, and he was going to get it over with—in just a minute—or two—

How could things *look* so peaceful—down there in the valley? That harmless stream could rampage over much of what was now visible, but never, of course, over the town's three "Hills." What river would dare!

With the River's bend as the fourth corner, the three manor-topped, low rises had long served notice that they enclosed all hereabout that was "worthwhile." For years the town had kept within that rectangle of water-elm, hackberry and magnolia, of crushed limestone streets. Its small business district had grown shabbier and, it seemed, smaller. The false fronts of wooden stores built in the seventies contrasted with pretentious two-storied red brick piled up in the nineties to emphasize the uglinesses of both.

Near that east side of the rectangle was the Public Square, a gift to the City by some forgotten Reardon (that deed had been burned, too). It provided ample space for farm wagons to stand a whole day at a time, mostly on Saturdays. At its center, within a circling band of occasionally watered grass and magnolia trees, was the town's *combined* Court House and City Hall. In its planning stage, it had been a replica of Independence Hall, that is, until the bereaved mother of "Little Teresa," to distract her from her truly epic grief, had "taken up" architecture. She it was who had altered the red brick tower into a fancy-topped "campanile," and "sketched in" a clock-face on each of its four sides. Its black slate roof became "more Mansard." A four-foot limestone wall around its base had not "completely ruined its lines," although the nominal architect was reported to have so proclaimed, widely and heatedly.

No one seemed to think unusual a town clock which no longer ran. Nor a Court House fountain which had never been completed. A large bronze plaque on its basin proved it a gift to "The City of Sironia" in 1897 by Hazel and himself. Having provided another of the town's civic controversies, the vacant basin had long since become

a convenient community trash can. Its incomplete state was due to its statue of "The South Triumphant," stored in a basement jail cell since the early spring of 1898. (Tam and his "Panthers" were often to wriggle through a specially broken basement window to stare through bars by lighted matches to satisfy one desire and create another. Its installation in its basin had been prevented by "Sironia's outraged womanhood," meaning Carietta Cahoon Storrow, because one Tennessee marble breast was "entirely bare.")

What Bill had to go through with all that! Yep — and what he was about to go through *now* —

"Calvin — reckon I'll ever be a Sironian-in-good-standing? With your Cousin Pyramus and his ma and even 'Little Teresa' forever leaving their graves to blackball me?"

His companion ended an affectionate survey of what was once "all in the family" to laugh softly. It was not his well-bred "banker's laugh," but far more understanding. "It does seem our 'revered dead' just won't stay put. I'm not a superstitious man — you know that — but I wouldn't get any pleasure at all out of walking alone at night," he nodded westward toward Syringa," — through Jasmine Mound Cemetery."

"Well, I'll be damned!" But it helped Bill issue an ultimatum to himself. "Calvin — sure and I hate like the very devil to bring up such as this, but — but, on the other hand, I'd kind of like to be able to go back to my own home sometime. If you want to give me a swift kick in the ass when I'm through, *I* sure won't blame you. You see — I mean — Oh, hell!"

Bill dragged his vest-pocket watch out into the moonlight. It was his third look in as many minutes. Still a little early, but he could use the time — sizing up the situation.

"This'll do." He leaped over the wheel at the South Wagon Bridge before the trap had come to a stop. "Thanks for the ride and — the other — "

He was glad Calvin didn't wait. No need to: each knew the other had enjoyed the juicy, highly seasoned barbecue, the few but good drinks, the poker session and especially being with the two others. Yes, sir-ee, a perfect evening — except for those few downright painful minutes alone with Calvin. Good old Calvin. He'd made them as easy for Bill as he could. He hadn't objected to these East Sironia plans either. He knew Bill loved Hazel, admired her, too. Hazel did real well — with what she had. It was just that a man like Bill occasionally needed something between him and a woman's bones.

Bill sought the shadows of East Sironia as he walked slowly, thought rapidly. Was he rushing things? He didn't believe so. A slightly dowdy brunette in pink shirtwaist and sleazy blue skirt had switched in three different times this last week to ask about — lumber. Each time she'd sent one look through his open office door. The last time had been the noon hour when Bill had the office pretty much to himself. The company's services were satisfactory? Oh, yes, indeed, she had assured him.

She was well filled out, something he had come to appreciate more and more. Her husband, Milt Temple, was a night-shift brakeman: had to work all night Saturdays — darn it! Of course, the children were some company — but they went to bed so early, nine-thirty or ten, even Lottie, so big for her age. Just how she got it in he didn't recall; but it seemed her few neighbors, none really near, said they could tell the nights Milt was home, because the southeast windows, their bedroom's, were open — a regular "fresh air fiend" the man was. Mister Elliott couldn't know what it meant to a wife never to have her husband home on a Saturday night to go places. If it wasn't his regular Saturday night "on," he'd work for one or another of the unmarried brakemen who paid him double. He was so *much* older than she was — more like a father really — and ought not be working such long hours. Mister Oscar Rogan had promised Milt he'd be on the lookout for something for him. She shrugged helplessly — and all over. She had the natural scent of the women he used to know best. Hazel, now, didn't have *any* — a terrible thing in a woman.

Below East Main Street, he found the town even more quiet. The low, ugly cottages were all one drab color — no color at all now. He halted in a clump of cedars. That must be her house. Inside its leaning picket fence, it was badly out of line along its eaves. Over there was east, which would make the southeast room the — the only one with every window up — damn! Unless he was early and she hadn't closed them yet.

By moonlight, anyone crossing the yard could be seen, if not identified, for three blocks in all directions.

Lightly he cursed Mrs. Milt. Active along these lines, the least she could do was plant some shrubbery. Bill didn't like the idea of belly-crawling across that bare yard — a good fifty yards. When the windows closed — this or some other Saturday night — he'd wait for a cloud like that one just edging over the moon. Then if no one was in sight, he could run through the broken gate, squeeze flat under the eaves of the cottage, and —

A loud crash of splitting wood and splintering glass had come — from the Temple cottage! The chair which had smashed through one of the bedroom windows bounced once and came to rest in the

yard. A man leaping through the window landed on his feet — running. Half bent he spurted for the east fence. A second man's figure loomed into smashed window space. This one was laughing, roaring with laughter as the fleeing man straightened up in his flight long enough only to leap the picket fence. The booming laughter ceased. The whole night was filled now with vile abuse — in a woman's voice. It was the same one that had been so soft, inviting and "lonesome" about lumber. It changed to shrieks as the fugitive disappeared in the gloom. The enormous man at the window turned to face the raging shrew. Unmistakably he began what was probably a routine job, *beating* the lonesomeness out of her.

This was to be expected. But why hadn't he first pursued and leaped upon the man? Why hadn't he, in true Sironian tradition, shot him — or, at least, shot *at* him? Why was Milt Temple taking it all out on her? Was it because, for once, a husband knew where the real blame lay? Whatever it was, she was sure catching it — and putting up a good scrap on her own. Little child voices were piping up, "Bite him, Ma — where you did last time. He'll let go."

". . . the little children . . . of such is the kingdom of God." Bill laughed soundlessly as he moved off, keeping to the shadows. There was something he'd recognized about the Temples' departing guest. For an instant he'd almost identified the man. Then he hadn't: Marshall couldn't have got here in time for all this. Plainly, it was someone Milt Temple knew better than to beat up as he had others — It was none of Bill's business, but all the same he'd like to know. Might never. In that light, could've been almost any fellow with no clothes on —

With a wave of the hand, Bill saluted his unknown benefactor and got back to that other matter, the one he'd finally asked Calvin about.

CHAPTER 2

CALVIN HADN'T driven straight home after letting Bill out at the bridge. He wanted that last drink to evaporate a little. Had anyone intimated he was seeking this means of postponing what he had pledged himself to do, he would have been surprised, honestly so.

It was all of half an hour before he could no longer use the liquored-breath excuse. He turned the bays over to a just awakened young Negro, went inside and up the sweeping old stairway.

At her door, he knocked softly. There was no reply. "Milly?" His rap was repeated. He knew she was awake. He had seen her room's bed lamp from Main Street. "I want to—ask you something."

"What—time is it?" As if she didn't know better than he!

"Not late. Something after eleven."

"Really? Something after twelve, too!"

He opened the unlocked door, laughing softly as if she were joking although he knew better. "I was hoping you'd be awake. I might

forget if I wait until morning —" And by *morning*, he did *not* add, the courage of that last round of highballs would have vanished.

Her bedroom was suggested rather than revealed by the bed lamp and strong moonlight. The flatness of the white draperies framed tall ceiling-to-floor windows. The massive shadows were hulked walnut dresser, mirror and quarter-canopied bed with a prayer step on either side.

She lay, back to him, a mound of covers. She did not move as he skirted the lyre-legged table to sit beside her. The room was quite comfortable. She never let much air in rooms day or night. Again he wished she wouldn't use so much lavender water — or else air the big room out more often. Impulsively he laid a hand on the hip-mound. He felt disapproving tremor and withdrew it.

"From something that was said — up at Marshall's tonight, Milly, I got the idea that — that —"

"What was said?" She had turned on her back, more than her voice rigid. "Who said it?"

"Never mind. What I want to say is — I think Hazel and Bill Elliott would like to be — included in —"

"In *my* party? I wouldn't doubt it. They've got their gall — at least she has. *Can't* say I'm surprised." She sat up, pushed her back against the headboard. The lavender bed cap was fresh and unwrinkled. "It's been Negro-talk for some time that the hatchet-faced little — snip would stop at nothing to get an invitation. Calvin, dear, I've not complained of your odd preference in friends — lately. The next thing I know you'll be thinking the Milt Temples would 'like to be included.' Well — you've told me! Good night. You know if I don't get to sleep the first part of the —"

"I *want* them invited, Milly."

"Really, Calvin!" This was the sharpness she reserved for finality. "I dare say *he's* all right — for an evening *apart* from your family, but you're forgetting *whose* daughter *she* is?"

"How could I — in this house?"

"Easily — it would seem! It's *nothing* that *Old* Tom Bly blackmailed my own dear father into selling him Syringa —"

"Blackmailed? Neither he nor your father ever told anyone why — *how*, rather."

"One doesn't have to be told some things!"

"Even if it was blackmail, Hazel had no more to do with it than — you did!"

"Really, Calvin! If you don't leave my room, I — I shall."

"No, you won't!" That surprised him more than it did her, as did his hands pinning down the satin coverlet about her. "I'm staying just long enough to — to *ask* that you send Old Fred up to the

Elliotts' with an invitation — the *first* thing Monday morning." He rose, stood looking down at her quietly.

"Cal-vin!" She sat up under released covers. Slightly graying brown hair gleamed in the dimness. "You can't mean anything so absurd. It's ridiculous!" and in mounting indignation, "I won't be humbled in my own — *won't* have her!"

"All right. Have your party. Get all the womanly pleasure you can out of hurting her feelings and — get whatever you like out of explaining why I am not present, either!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I wouldn't? Milly — I know how aggravating Hazel can be. She'll do some loud crowing if she *is* included on your list. What woman in this town wouldn't? But even if he was a tramp once — Bill Elliott's one of the finest men I ever met. In the ten years he's been here, he's done more to put this town on the map than some at the *top* of your damned 'list'! Think it over, my dear."

She *was* thinking. Small white hands pressed to temples, lips pursed reflectively. Calvin *couldn't* hold her up to lasting ridicule by staying away that night! He'd give in, because it just wouldn't do for him not to. She'd stand her ground — why, if she gave in on this, it'd not only be admitting that unspeakable Hazel to one function: the bars would be down! It *was* ridiculous — Calvin was excited, a little stimulated, perhaps. But suppose he didn't attend — was seen somewhere else the night of her "Last Friday"! Something sensible must be worked out that would let Calvin think he'd won his absurd point. Marshall and his Moira she invariably invited. But it was understood without a word's ever being said that only he would come. There was a convincing little explanation about Moira's not being well, or needing to stay with their boy, or visiting her Thorndyke relatives someplace. A little wifely diplomacy was indicated.

"Mister Elliott has made remarkable — strides, Calvin. I'd be the last to deny that. But, as you well know, a *man* can — rise socially, whereas — " Was *this* her gentle Calvin: this stern-lipped man motionless, withdrawing farther and farther from her? "Calvin, my feelings obviously are no consideration, but you — you couldn't humiliate the *family!*" She was getting mad. "It'll just kill Cousin Carietta and all — "

"If things like that are going to kill her, she'd better die and get it over with!" Hill Family heresy! "Carietta's as much my cousin as she is yours, — but you can have my share!"

"I think we have both said *more* than enough!" His manner, perhaps, his very erectness as he stood, trembling a little, had convinced her this was no time for flat refusal. She'd give him a night's sleep, and he'd be all right. "We'll discuss it — in the morning."

For a moment she felt passing fear he was not going to be put off.

"All right. Good night, my dear." He leaned over to kiss her, was not surprised at the counterpane drawn up, not for the first time, between his lips and her cheek. Nor was the long-drawn sigh unexpected, no less anguished for its softness, its near-break into plaintive sob. Trembling inwardly with let-down from the enormity of his insubordination, he walked as steadily as he could into his own room and closed the connecting door.

He'd probably never understand her. Nowhere was there a kinder heart, one more willing to help those needing it — provided, of course, they didn't "presume" on her kindness later by becoming "familiar." Calvin was proud of the way she had made the home in which he had been born her home. It was not just because he was a year younger than she, although that might have had something to do with the brief time it had taken. And Milly and he shared the same — burden.

How much better it would be if she, as *he* had long ago, could only admit to herself what Launcelot could never be. Instead she had set her head, blinded herself to so much, was pushing the boy, always pushing. Would she — could she even acknowledge the fact that their son was the latest to bear "The Reardon Mark"? Innumerable doctors here, in St. Louis and even Chicago had confirmed it. Calvin had admitted it, sought what consolation there was: Lance could have been another horrible, pathetic Pyramus! Not so Milly. "Rubbish! Doctors become pompous fools the instant they meet a personality they can't pigeonhole. My boy will make us proud of him — you'll see!" That was Milly — and another reason he could not be too demanding.

He hated for a day to end like this. Mightn't it make things a *little* better if — His step back to their door was never completed, for the key on her side of it was being turned loudly, was being rattled for good measure.

Bill Elliott was a rich man who still insisted on a "section hand's breakfast" at six-thirty. Hazel had strong ideas about a wife who *didn't* breakfast with her husband — "like someone I could name. Not over three blocks away, either."

In the Elliott household, meals were "square meals." This one included fruit and cereal, then coffee, ham or bacon and eggs and toast, concluding with damson plum preserves on pancakes or biscuit with sorghum syrup. Hazel enjoyed watching Bill eat. She even enjoyed *hearing* him eat. Everything he did gave added meaning to

her life, and depth. He grinned as he chewed. Their rise in finances was showing up in her reduced appetite, in finicky table manners, in green-ribboned boudoir cap and this orange flannelette wrapper the sewing woman had finished just yesterday.

Nowhere was there greater evidence of her genuine devotion to her red hulk of husband than in the fact that she kept her mouth shut so he could enjoy his breakfast. Besides he'd told her the little there was to tell — over and over when he got in last night. "In" so early he *couldn't* have been up to anything!

"What's all the commotion out in the kitchen?" Bill's third cup of strong black coffee halted halfway to wide Irish upper lip thrust forward in readiness to inhale it sputteringly.

"Just wondering. Charlotte knows she's not allowed visitors in the kitchen." Hazel was pushing back, carefully tightening the orange belt and assembling her expression of domestic displeasure.

"Aw, wait until we get through eating. By that time you'll have thought up a lot more to say — "

"Hush, Bill. It's hard enough keeping the niggers in line as it is. Honestly, the way you joke *with* them is — It seems the grapevine is getting an early start."

He had heard the soft slurring talk from the kitchen, too. "All I ask is that you wait until I'm out of the house — " In mock haste he kissed her and ran for the front door.

Outside he paused on his front walk. He often did these days. It was gratifying, how he had "shown" Sironia. Hazel had said he would and, by damn, he had. What better proof could there be than the recently completed "Elliott Hotel"?

It fairly flaunted its rounded porches, its many gables, its gray and white turret in the morning sun. Hazel Elliott had sniffed her annoyance at the nickname for their new home. But Bill's gingery muttonchop whiskers had shaken as his cheeks crinkled upward from wide "common handsome" expanse of ruddy face. "Damn if it *ain't* a hotel!"

There were two bedrooms on the third floor and six on the second. Of the latter, four had not yet been slept in. The fifth was used only when Bill had fled the sixth under one of Hazel's frequent and annihilating tantrums. At such times he would lock himself in and complacently doze off, despite baffled feminine imprecations and door-poundings from the hallway outside.

Bill freely admitted his wife had provided the constant shove that his amiable, easygoing shiftlessness needed. For all of him, she might do whatever she wanted to with their new easy-come, easy-go money. If she spent it all, he knew how to make more. He had his fingers in so damn many pies they'd make him dizzy if he'd let them. What the hell, a fellow had to live — a little.

That was one thing Hazel *didn't* worship about him. He didn't put any value on money, didn't know how. He'd invest in just anything — unless she got wind of it in time and put her foot down — hard. If it weren't for her, as she had told him often enough, she didn't know what would become of them. Neither did he. Only he didn't much care: the Circus always needed a good roustabout, and had never had a better one than Bill Elliott.

Her one great extravagance was "The Elliott Hotel." For all of its costly uglinesses, it was pretty much what a lot of Sironian wives might have had flung together in 1900 if they'd had husbands like him who'd let go the money. Her first requirement — almost a contract specification — had been that it must be larger than either of the original "Hill" Manors. It *was* — unmistakably. Far back in its yard's whole half-block, it was as noticeable, too, even without the elevation of one of Sironia's "precious hills." "The old lady" had really let herself go, yes, *sir!*

The worst that had been said of the "Hotel's" *interior* was that it was "what one might expect from the outside!" Its entrance vestibule was more the size of the customary Sironia entrance *hallway*. Its entrance hallway was larger than the customary "library." To the hallway's left were the unavoidable double parlors, each but slightly smaller than the Lipscombs' whole cottage. There was a booklessly virgin library, high-paneled in glaring golden oak. Its towering fireplace and mantel of brick had been painted to look (a little) like one of Syringa's several of green marble. As with the three "Hill" homes, the whole downstairs could be "thrown together for entertaining." That was the *starting point* in all home-planning by those able to afford it. All the plumbing and electric fixtures had come from somewhere far off: clacking, gleaming chandeliers from France; marble bathtubs from Italy; tapestry draperies from Belgium; solid mahogany (some of it gilded) from many places, mostly Michigan. Because Hazel liked the "Hotel" as it was when finished, Bill did, too.

He looked back again as the gray tail of the mare he was riding to work swished past the high black grille of the driveway gate. *All* his!

"Charlotte!" Hazel called from the dining room.

"Yes'm." The way the big, black girl eased into the room told a great deal. The new quiet, the cast-down eyes, the self-importance with which she swept her long gingham skirts about the table removing the dishes proved Hazel right.

She watched Bill out of sight from the bay window across the west wall, straightening as she did so one heavy red damask curtain that

needed no straightening. It would be better if she let Charlotte start. But the more important her news the more she made Hazel drag it from her. This was obviously important.

"Charlotte, didn't I hear — voices — out back?"

"Yes'm." Charlotte became meeker, more absorbed in the routine of clearing the crowded tablecloth under low, stained-glass shade. The amber whites of her eyes showed as she watched Hazel covertly. "It were Melissa!"

"Oh! And what brought her over so early? Borrowing again?" As if Thaxton's Melissa would ever be sent to borrow *here!*

"No'm — I means, Yes'm." This was getting just too much for Charlotte, too. There was a great sigh of escaping excitement.

"What is it, Charlotte?" Hazel appeared interested only in her small, brittle nails.

"Melissa — she say things ovah to Thaxtons' is picked up!"

"Picked up? How do you mean?"

"Mister Ca-alvin done tole Miz Milly whar to head in!"

"Charlotte! That's — disrespectful. Melissa's getting old — imagines things, don't you —?"

"No'm. She's my favrite Auntie. She wouldn' run ev'y step o' de way ovah here to tell me nothin' she didn' *know*. Not *befo'* brekkfuss!"

"No-o. Melissa's a good girl. What — " Hazel hated having to pump a Negro for gossip, she told herself again. "What else — did she say?"

This was what Charlotte had waited on: wa'nt nobody goner say *she* went 'round tellin' whitefolks nothing — 'less'n they axed her to. "Melissa, she say usual dey ain't a peep frum Miz Milly's rume 'til 'roun eight or nine. But Josie heered talk — *loud* talk befo' she were halfway up all dem curvin' stairsteps wid Marse Calvin's early cawfee." Charlotte launched out in earnest. Hazel was good at listening, could think while she was doing it, too.

Melissa either had a remarkable memory for what Josie had reported or with the natural gift of her race was able to remember the main facts and fill in — also embellish. Even allowing for her — and Josie's — inaccuracies and Charlotte's desire, as narrator, to please, there had most certainly been a drastic upheaval in the cold calm of Thaxton existence. "Dey ain't nevuh squabbled, dis-a-way befo'! Dey sounded jus' like othah married folks, Melissa say Josie say." Shrill on her part, gruff on his — both had been ma-ad. Miss Milly had said she'd call her bi-ig party off if Marse Calvin did something — Melissa didn't know what. And he'd said that would suit him just fine. Then *she* had said she'd have only the afternoon part, invite only women! And what would he do about that? He had said if any women were invited "she" — whoever 'twas — must be, or he'd never go out with

Miss Milly in public again! Things had sho got bad then — for *them*.

It kept up until Marse Ca-alvin said real final, "Make up your mind, Millicent — "

"I'll let you know, Calvin — in a day or two!"

"So — *their* invitation will be received *later* than the others! And everybody will know it was intentional. That — won't do! You'll ask them *this* morning or — "

At that point — unfortunately — Miss Milly "had done flew clean off de handle," and slammed the door so Josie couldn't hear no more. Charlotte stopped talking, began clearing the table with great industry.

Hazel knew that "Quality" weren't supposed to discuss such matters with servants. She also knew that they did. Not that it mattered in this instance. "Oh, I'm sure it wasn't as bad as all *that*, Charlotte. Josie does exaggerate and so does Melissa. I — I do hope poor Mister Ca-alvin finally got his coffee —?"

"Melissa, she say she let me know. She lef' Josie to ten' to things an' run ev'y step o' de way up heah to — to borrer a cup o' sugar. 'Twere all right — to let 'er have it, wa'nt it, Miz Hazel?"

"Charlotte!" Cragged little face under nervous green ribbons turned quickly away jerking with exasperation. "Yes — yes, of course, it was, Charlotte."

At her breakfront secretary (freighted down the Mississippi for Temperance Reardon Thaxton), Millicent was porcelain-pale and stiff. In one small white hand was an onyx pen-staff, in the other an open cut-glass vial. The latter was touched frequently to exquisite, un-Thaxton-like little nose. Before her was a blank, cream envelope and its engraved card:

Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Reardon Thaxton
request the pleasure of your company
on Thaxton Hill
the last Friday in November of 1900

Dancing
R.S.V.P. *Eight-Thirty*

The wording was always the same. Why not, when it was exactly right? In one drawer of the breakfront were piled twenty-one engraver's plates (including this year's) — one for every "Last Friday in November" since their marriage in the spring of 1880. No one

knew how many unused invitations from those twenty Novembers were boxed away in long and mercifully dead Pyramus' old observatory room. Each lot left over was tied in tissue paper with its excess of dance-programs. Leftover cotillon favors, sample bits of decoration, and society-reporter "accounts" of each were included. Next to them were stored the tissue-paper flowers. There were large cardboard boxes, one for La France (pink) roses, Water Lilies (white), and Maréchal Niel (yellow) roses. Each provided "the color" in rotation. The yellow roses had been used in 1898, the water lilies last year, and this year would bring out of storage the pink roses again. Those torn or crushed in use were discarded when removed from brittle, wilting smilax the morning after each "last Friday." There were, in reality, three functions. First came the decorating. This involved relatives, "dear friends" and "the niggras." Next came the function itself. Last, the taking down of the decorations.

Always Miss Milly superintended the packing away of the boxed flowers so as not to crush them. Near them was another box. This one was of black tin ornamented with blue forget-me-nots by what was once reported as "Mrs. Thaxton's talented brush." It was kept locked and always in front of the tissue-paper blossoms and old invitations. ("The Forget-Me-Not Box" held Marshall Lipscomb's youthful love notes to the youthful Milly of 1878 and -79. He had sent at least one every day during those years — by messenger from a distance of five blocks or less. The woman who reread them in moments of depression bore little resemblance, in manner, to the one now confronted by a blank envelope — the one hundred and fifteenth.

It wasn't that she was a snob. No one, she was sure, could ever say that *truthfully* about a Thaxton! If a husband wanted *his* friends invited, they should be invited. Certainly, no others present would for one minute think the Elliotts were *hers*. She didn't in the least mind inviting Moira, as humiliated as she had been by Marshall's marrying Cousin Sylvia's maid. After all, she *was* Marshall's wife — and, besides, she *never* came. How Marshall, already married, had suffered! She could see him as plainly as she had that twilight of twenty years ago. He stood near Mother Dorabelle's grape arbor, "the look of the damned in his eyes" all during *her* marriage ceremony. Milly did not choose to recall that he could never have remained standing without the aid of those strong vine trunks. Milly recalled nothing she did not choose to.

If Hazel Bly could be depended on "to decline" — or even to confine her victory to going down the receiving-line, nibbling a sandwich, saying she'd had a lovely time, *must* rush away. Not *Hazel!* Hazel "went whole hog" (her favorite and eminently suitable expression) on everything. Every clerk in Lipscomb's knew she was using the

new money that Calvin had helped Bill Elliott make (never "that Bill Elliott had helped Calvin make") to "climb the social ladder" in Sironia? If she'd come only this once and be satisfied — ?

No. Once she had "breached the walls," she'd move on to consolidate her gain. Still blank, the creamy-white envelope was fingered constantly in the delicately veined little hand. And that "consolidation" would be, Milly knew "perfectly well," a "housewarming" of that — monstrosity just completed.

Milly *could* send the invitation without its ever *getting* there. Old Fred could be depended on to forget to deliver it, if she told him to deliver it, and then distracted his mind with other orders the rest of the morning. No. Calvin was going to *see* it was received.

She could consult Cousin Carietta — as a last resort. Tempered steel underneath pastel grays and lavenders and bronze-blonde hair, the beautiful Carietta would know how to solve this "intol'able" situation. Only, if the truth were known, Milly "lost as little love" on her as she did on Hazel. She couldn't "abide" Carietta's Burne-Jones pallor, muffled tones, tiny kerchiefs. Her keeping to her room to gain her point; that turning of cheek to kisses; those mild, injured looks — in sum total had kept Webley Storrow in complete subjection to his grave! But Carietta hadn't been forty then, as Milly was now, nor had her husband been a year younger than she — as Milly's was. Calvin would know whose advice such tactics were. Cousin Carietta was the only one who invariably rubbed Calvin the wrong way.

Milly was back again to Calvin's ultimatum. That about changing to an afternoon reception had seemed inspiration to her — briefly. It hadn't fooled Calvin a moment. Why, her "last Friday" was one of the few "institutions" left in Sironia's social life. Everyone who amounted to anything socially expected — one might even say *depended* on — its being an evening affair — not just a "reception."

Reflectively she bit the onyx pen-staff — Oh, *dear!*

Lips pursed and eyes squinted more than usual, Hazel stood rearranging the gathers of ecru net over the front entrance glass panels. She had been rearranging them at intervals most of the morning. Suddenly she stopped, parted the "gathers" — just enough for one eye. A bent old Negro was hitching a team of bays to the four-foot cast-iron jockey at the Elliotts' Main Street curb.

Hazel ran to tall newel post. Its yard-high bronze nymph actually was coyly smiling from between calla lilies taller than she, each holding a tiny electric globe. Hugging the stairway wall of dark brown leather-paper embossed almost to bas-relief depth she scurried up-

stairs. She must be out of sight before Old Fred could ring the electric doorbell and Pomphrey answer. If not, it would be all over town in no time she'd been *watching* for her invitation.

Orange wrapper flapping about thin shanks, she made it easily to "The Rose Room." It was the one with cabbage-rose carpet. Its pink plaster walls were all atrail with garlands of wild-rose vines "hand-painted right on the plaster by that itinerant Bavarian artist." Big-bellied, big-mustachioed, he could paint wild roses and lilies, anything botanical, drunk or sober. He ornamented homes, saloons and "fancy houses" indiscriminately. Not a bedroom in "The Elliott Hotel" had escaped, and hardly a well-known flower.

Hazel's hair and the orange wrapper against pink walls and pinker roses would have made some — Miss Milly, for one — physically uncomfortable. To Hazel, if something was "pretty" it stayed pretty. What it was put next to had nothing to do with it. It was Mrs. Stacey (Nanette) Lane who summed things up, "If you are redecorating anything and want to avoid mistakes, 'The Elliott Hotel' has all of them." That was, undoubtedly, why Nanette herself had called so promptly. Hazel had never liked her. When asked if she liked Hazel, she had said, "Does it signify?"

"Miz Hazel?"

"What is it, Pomphrey?"

"A letter — or sump'n — frum de Thaxtons."

"Very well. Put it on the hall table, and I'll get it presently."

"Yas'm." She heard the light scrape of paper on marble top, had to hold herself to the dressing table with its ballet skirt of fluffy pink. She must wait five minutes at least. Every Negro on the place was on the lookout for something worth dropping everything for and "runnin' ev'y step o' de way" down to Cousin Melissa.

Four and a half minutes would have to do! Bony, strong-tendoned little hands let go the pink ruffles. She listened. There was no sound. Slowly she turned the cut-glass knob and pulled open the door. There it was. Almost square, creamy white, it lay on the gray marble "tabouret." She gathered up trailing orange to stop its soft scrape across the thick hall carpet, and tiptoed, to the head of the stairs. As she touched the envelope, her heart "squeezed" to a stop. Old Pomphrey was carefully dusting the bronze nymph and lilies. He *knew*. Bly rage choked her. It must be held. She jammed the envelope into an orange pocket. "Pomphrey, you're to rake up leaves *today!*"

"Yas'm."

She ran a finger along the banister rail. With Charlotte's Lucy to look after upstairs, Charlotte's Tooraboo, the downstairs, and Charlotte herself in the kitchen to look after both, a grain of dust never had time to more than "light." Her finger came away perfectly clean. She frowned at it. A good housekeeper had to show servants they

could not neglect their work. And her gesture had denoted lack of haste. Let them spread *that*.

Back inside the pink room, she tore the creamy flap so hastily its enclosure fell to the carpet. She read it as it lay half open on a cabbage-rose. She could have read it just as easily had it landed face down and her eyes been closed. It was, in a way, the keystone to a whole structure of which their new home was only a stone. Breath sucked in quickly made a pleasant sound.

How many times as a girl had she longed for just this? As a Bly she'd stood a hell's-snowball chance of getting it. She had never known how her father acquired Syringa. She'd heard none of the Hill Family descendants did, either, but she knew they held it against her.

She stooped to pick up the invitation — no, it would "sound" better if Lucy found it lying there, forgotten. She crossed to the bell button by the door, and rang twice. That would set Pomphrey to harnessing the span of grays. By the time she was dressed he'd have them hitched to her own surrey in the porte-cochère wide enough for *two* carriages.

It didn't take her long to get ready: she had known exactly what she was going to do if the invitation came. And if it didn't. She laced her new straight-front corset with no effort, and filled in the numerous vacancies it left with fragrant little pads which gave her an approximation of the hour-glass figure on all the latest patterns. Annoyance over her own skinniness blended into recurring amusement over Bill's bridal-night query, "Do I sleep with what's *in* the bed or *on* the chair?" He — he'd found out.

Expertly she slipped into additional starched petticoats, shirtwaist and the tight-waisted, black-braided pearl-gray "coatsuit." Once she paused. Was it true (what Nanette had said): "If Hazel could have a child she wouldn't be turning things upside down to get into a society which don't want her"? Hazel was going to waste no more thought on that. But it had cut — as Nanette had intended, she was sure — and cut deep. Bill wanted children *so* much. One of twelve raised in near-destitution, he still thought a family wasn't a family *without*. That was the main reason she'd never raised the rumpus some wives would have over another of Nanette's tales about him.

Decisively she fixed the gray velvet gravy-boat with its large-winged gray bird to her frizzy hair with three hatpin jabs. It was a lot better to be too small almost every way to bear a child than to have a fine, handsome son, surround him with linens and laces and pose all over town with him — and then have him turn out Lance Thaxton! For all Milly Thaxton's pride and better-than-thouness, Hazel could "feel for her" and curse her, if not in the same breath, in two that were very close together.

Black-braided gray trailed briefly on the carpeted stair as she swept

down. Just beyond the bronze nymph she took a small folding parasol — the gray one — from the metal cylinder set into enormous carved mahogany hatrack. "Charlotte!"

"Yas'm?" Great black hands covered with flour appeared first through the hall's rear door.

"Got everything you need for dinner —?"

"Yes'm — 'cep'n de roas' and de pertaters an' de black-eye peases an' — "

"Oh, dear! Well, don't just stand there. Make out your list and give it to Pomphrey. If Mr. Elliott gets back before I do, give him his dinner on time. I may be late trying to find something suitable for — " she was in front of the hatrack glass, pushing the tight gray coat flaps down over padded hips, " — the Thaxtons'."

"Fred done tole me. He come slinkin' 'roun' back after he deelivered hit. Bin lookin' down on me and de gals a long time. I kinder looked down on him some, myse'f, dis mawnin'."

"Now, Charlotte! Fred's been with Thaxtons so long he even acts like — " No Bill wouldn't like her to be quoted saying that, as she certainly would be. " — like he owns the place."

"Whut you aimin' ter wear?"

"I've got to see what materials Lipscomb's has in stock. May have them wire Kansas City — if I can get Mrs. Timkins this week to come make it up."

"You got a million dresses you ain't wore much o' any place — "

"Now, Charlotte." Hazel was pleased. "None of them is at all suitable — all quite — simple."

"If hit's pritty an' leaves un-covered all de law 'lows, simple-ness don't make no diff'ence to de men folks."

Hazel's deep-down, hearty mirth always surprised strangers. Where'd she stow all that contralto laughter in that scrawny body? It made Charlotte laugh, too. "You wouldn't want me talked about for wearing an old dress to Thaxton Hill — now, would you?"

"No'm — de mo' you buys, de nearer Tooraboo come to gettin' dat sa'mon-pink wid de blue buttons runnin' frum here down to — "

"Charlotte! It's not polite to hint."

"No-m — but hit so' he'ps." The booming laughs of mistress and cook were in complete harmony — like "part-singing."

Hazel had watched Hill Family drivers for years. Under her orders, Pomphrey had climbed down and stood holding the reins of dappled gray Star and Rabbit.

Her "personal carriage" was a black surrey with trim of gold lines.

It had a double seat in front for driver and a double rear seat wide enough for two — three no wider than its mistress. The flat top, supported by six thin iron rods, was bound around the edge by black fringe four inches long. The iron step into the rear was so high she never used it without a block or curb. She could step that high and higher, but it would have revealed one leg to where a calf should have begun.

The driveway's step was level with the floor of the surrey. She did not have to use the iron step. My, it was a nice, bright day! "All right, Pomphrey — *down* Main!"

The prankish Rabbit and the high-strung, skittish Star sprang into motion at the lightest twitch of the lines. Were they purposely scattering the drive's fresh gravel as far as possible with their trim-shod hooves? Hazel looked back, as Bill had. She'd give their house — their *mansion* some of the credit for this day. Good God-a-mighty, this wind!

Little squint eyes automatically swung upward. There on the bluff a good half-mile away rode Syringa. Its great "south portico" columns were whiter than cloud. She hadn't lived there for ten years now, never would again. It was one of the things she'd given up for Bill. She'd do it again, too. Often she told others how she loved "my old home," but she never had. When she was born, her mother (Aisla Jacobs Bly) had known that living in the original Reardon home would keep every Hill Family door closed to her forever. Had Aisla survived double pneumonia in 1880, she would never have let Old Tom sever all ties with their daughter. She had stood up to him as nobody else ever had. Many had been the tales of noise-of-battle carrying on moist air from across the River. Hazel had become used to their fights. They had even done some good. When the same feelings inside her would otherwise have made her fight Bill as Aisla would have, remembering brought Hazel some control. Some, not much.

This morning, Syringa seemed to loom larger than ever. Her *dear* half-brother was having it painted again. Well, he might as well spend her money (hers in the sense that half should have gone to her) on that as on one of those chapels or missions some church or other he didn't give a damn about was always gouging out of him. Or — on those various females the negroes claimed they saw arriving or departing. *Young* Tom, lordly son of Chrysée Storrow in the daytime and his father's son at night! She'd admit he was a good manager for the old place. He had sold off a sizable part at a good profit. And he actually did "look like" someone who owned Syringa. Overformal, overpolite, he was still uneasy in the presence of Quality. Yet, in some perverse way she was not going to waste time explaining even to her-

self, she was proud of him while she hated him and particularly so as she made fun of him.

"Pomphrey! Watch what you're doing. Trying to jerk my head off?"

"No'm."

"Hmmph!" Bill liked horseflesh "with some life in it." She did, too. Never easily frightened, she would, however, like to be free to think of something besides the possibility of being stood on her head the next minute in the middle of Main "showing more drawers than dignity!" If that was to happen, it couldn't be in a better place. This part of Main Street hadn't "built up" (wouldn't for another fifteen years). It was included in the part of the Reardon Estate which, tied up by disagreement among the heirs, couldn't be sold. Lawyers who had become wealthy from this litigation had, themselves, left sons and grandsons to profit likewise. On this subject, that rascal Jed Hadyn had said, "God help the Sironia Bar Association when the Reardon Estate plays out!"

Three full blocks on both sides of Main Street were still pasture, there being no structures of any kind between "The Elliott Hotel" and Thaxton Hill. Hazel would have preferred to build closer in, but every other location she really wanted was "in the courts." No Reardon descendant any longer expected to get anything from this land. It would just sit here until (as finally happened in 1904) the City took it over for taxes.

The muddy street, with no curbs (until Thaxton Hill), was nothing more than a tree-lined fairly straight lane. The River curved in ominously not fifty yards away in this block. Someone was always talking about straightening the hairpin curve that caused the severe floods on *this* side of the River, but Hazel doubted it would ever be done.

"Pomphrey, I hope you got the leaves raked up and in piles where the wind won't scatter them the minute we're out of sight — Pomphrey, you haven't had your driver's coat mended yet. How many times do I have to — When I get out at Lipscomb's, you positively must not go off and leave the team. And don't go to sleep like you did last time. They almost ran away, not that it wouldn't have served you right to be — Did Charlotte give you her list? All right, I can *see!* Watch what you're doing! Mister Bill wants the grays *always* in step! That's better. When did you *ever* dust out the surrey? It positively must be every — Pomphrey, won't you *ever* learn to sit up and try to look like — something? Hasn't one of the grays a loose shoe? No, I guess it was that piece of hoop iron. Pomphrey, don't slouch down like a — like — hmmph!"

At her left beyond the curbstone elms had loomed the gradual rise of Thaxton Hill. When Main Street had been laid out in the eighteen-

sixties, Calvin's mother had kept to her room for three days in an isolation of tears and smelling salts. The newly organized and unreasonable City Board had insisted that Main Street cut straight through Thaxton ground. It could just as easily have swung in a gradual curve around it. She had even sketched the fountain she would erect in the half-circle. It would be visible from the Court House five blocks down and from as far west as Main Street could run at the time.

Even Hazel admitted it had left Thaxton Manor, for its size and semicircular drive of crape myrtles, a little near the street. It still had its rear two-hundred-yard slope down toward Niggertown and the River. Hazel sniffed lightly. If anyone should ask her, more back yard was *needed* than front, what with Lance the way he was. One thing you had to say for Milly Thaxton: There wasn't a better-groomed man in town. Not many as *handsome* — just to look at, of course.

On these claptrap little homes between Thaxtons' and town, Bill's lumber yard had cleared a "nice piece of change." She honestly believed he'd rather live in a house that size again. Easygoing Bill! If he handled his business like he did their servants, the Elliotts would be in the poorhouse. Always soft-spoken he was, smiling and "just as you say"-ing everybody who phoned him — sometimes at all hours. Folks just naturally liked him, wanted to be around him. Some — too much so for his own good!

She could almost smile about it now. It had been serious then, her discovery, their sixth month of marriage, that a strict rein on him wasn't going to prevent a runaway. He might be "common as bitterweed," commoner even than the Blys; but he had the looks and the ways that, given half a chance, make the finest lady common, too. And she really thought once she married him she could make him over! As he'd said, she'd learned different. She remembered exactly when, too.

"In the cool of the evening" Bill and she had been driving between River Road's rustling willows and cottonwoods. With the Bluff's white wall and green cedars just beyond, it was a time for happy whispering. Instead she had used it to tell Bill all over again what he could do and couldn't, what she wouldn't "stand for" any longer. The cabin they were passing was little different from all the others of Niggertown. Its red-picket-fence half supported buxom young Lilybeth, Mammy Henderson's indolent and very black daughter. She wore only a slip of tight, nigger-pink cotton. Unlike other Hill Family Negroes, Lilybeth reportedly gave Mammy nothing but trouble, herself nothing but pleasure. She did have a nice figure "for a niggra"!

"Good evening, Lilybeth!" Graciously Hazel interrupted her steady beat of words on Bill.

By custom, the slender, big-bosomed Negress should have stopped singing, acknowledged the greeting politely and remained silent until they had passed on. She did none of these things. She nodded lazily without taking her eyes from down the Road (looking for some nigger boy probably) and sang loudly, deliberately Hazel was almost sure:

> "*Find out* how *he likes it*
> *And* whinn *he wants it,*
> *And give it to 'im ju-u-ust* dat *way*—"

"Well! Of *all* the impudence! She wouldn't have acted that way with a Thaxton! That's *one* Henderson needs 'tending to!"

It was then Bill had jumped, started to speak, caught himself, said nothing. When Hazel had fixed him with an accusing eye, he had blushed. Perhaps it was that blush that had fixed Lilybeth's song in Hazel's memory. Anyhow, it had started her thinking. Maybe, hopping on a man for every least little thing you don't like *isn't* the way to hold him. Maybe there was something *to* Lilybeth's song.

There was.

Pomphrey really had the grays stepping high as they passed the town's only hotel. Her most welcome memory of *it* came again. Briefly it had sheltered the *de* Storrows that time, mother and daughter. Hill Family birds surely "come home to roost"! They pretended what Pieter Hayden had done was nothing more than the high spirits of youth. Nanette Lane believed (or said she did) the family had put him up to it! About that Ninon de Storrow since this last August, Bill had spoken briefly and to the point. "On that subject, Old Lady, keep your goddam mouth shut!" She had. But—did Miss Carietta *really* think she was fooling anybody when she let pass no opportunity to refer to the light brown infant as "Leah Smith, the grandchild of a devoted family slave who wants her to serve his old whitefolks"? Why, the little nig was an almost exact duplicate of Hadyn Hill's own Nelia. Things were going to get more interesting around these parts, rather than less, mark Hazel Elliott's words—spoken with her "goddam mouth" good and shut!

"Town" had begun. Low stores, they were brick mostly, some stone—all dingy. The row of elms on each side went all the way to The Square. The Hadyn Opera House had never had any firsthand experience with anything resembling "grand opera." In an era when three quarter-size marble statues in public squares were considered the only really fitting tribute to one's heroic dead, Philip Reardon Hadyn (father of "that Jed" and Nelia) had been ahead of his time. To memorialize his parents, General Pluto Hadyn and Mary Lawrence Hadyn, Philip in 1890 had decided on something useful—an opera house. It had been used for countless amateur productions and a few

professional performances which played under their own canvas when necessary.

Whether or not such a structure (allowed gradually to get dingier and dingier, its red seats more plush-bare) was "the fitting memorial" it had been labeled in four hours of dedication ceremonies only the Hill Families had ever cared. The nearest thing to a semi-annual parade in Sironia were the (March and September) cleanings given "the opera house" by Miss Milly "with my own servants." It "formed" at Thaxton Hill and consisted of two wagonfuls of Negroes with buckets, mops, brooms and rags. Miss Milly, herself, followed in "my Victoria." Old Fred always drove her. She didn't even ask permission of the "City Fathers," nor did they expect her to. She was looking after what had been given by her brother-in-law in memory of her uncle-by-marriage. She sat out front in "my Victoria," with Old Fred to mind the horses. She "sent word in" constantly. Not until reassurance came that all was finished, as ordered, and the dust haze had died down did she dismount with the aid of portable steps (enclosed underneath to prevent any exposure above her instep). A white-gloved hand would run over red plush seats, over dress-circle railing holding twelve-inch curtains, across the top of the old grand piano in the enormous orchestra pit, and over the arms, never the legs, of the white plaster cupids not too high on the proscenium arch for her reach. Since, unconsciously, she invariably used the same places to test, the Negroes (old hands at conserving unlimited strength) had worked out a very satisfactory cleaning system. Their last stop was always the brace of round gold "boxes" on the right-hand side of the stage. These were marked on the orchestra side with heavy, engraved brass plates "Reserved for the family of General Pluto Hadyn II and Mary Lawrence Hadyn, to whose memory this temple of art is reverently and lovingly dedicated by their son, Philip Reardon Hadyn, and his wife, Sylvia Thaxton Hadyn." (The plates were still there years later when it became "The Hadyn" and later "The Paradise," a movie house.)

On the next corner to the right was the almost completed new building of the Sironia Bank. Founded by the first Pluto Hadyn as "Hadyn Banking Company" in 1840, it was incorporated now. (Calvin Thaxton owned practically all the stock. He had sold *her* Bill enough at book-value to qualify for election as a vice-president.) Low and "dignified" were its squat, Doric columns of real marble and flat roof. To Hazel such "simplicity" seemed a little "put on." Personally, she preferred the prevailing trend toward stonework of contrasting colors, Moorish arches, cupolas of red sandstone, patterned brickwork, handsome metal cornices — all with the name of the builder and the date legible blocks away.

"Stop — on the shady side, Pomphrey! And don't feed the horses

bunches of grass while I'm gone. Just that one time and it was all over town I stay in Lipscomb's so long you have to!" She looked both ways nearsightedly. No one was looking. A bony leg shot down from the high step to the limestone curb. Another followed. Skirts were quickly and primly rearranged as she advanced on Lipscomb's.

Founded by Marshall's "peddler" father, Fred, it had become the largest store in Sironia, the largest "general store" in Reardon County. "We Handle Everything!" "They nearabout do" was freely admitted. Lipscomb's Stores would have been more correct. Included were what had once been four one-story buildings, each housing a different kind of merchandise.

At sixteen, in 1875, Marshall had taken over one of them, his father's saddlery business. In 1878 he had absorbed the hardware-and-farm-implement business next to it. Finally, in 1879 (when Fred Lipscomb died) the clothing and household furnishing businesses had been added. That had left one space, the northeast corner of Main and Aurelia (Rogan's Grocery and Racket Store). Marshall hadn't included that until 1895—right after Tam was born. All combined into a full block's frontage on Main. Miss Milly's father, General Elijah, in refusing to consider Marshall as a son-in-law had clinched the whole argument with "Millicent, my daughter, Marshall is all right in his way. But the Lipscombs are *merchants!*" "*They* certainly *are!*" Hazel had often agreed when discussing one of her favorite topics: How much more "money" the Lipscombs had than the Thaxtons.

The interior of Lipscomb's in 1900 was an amalgam. Its many origins had fused with varying degrees of success. Originally the old partition walls had marked departmental limits. Some departments prospered, others declined. New lines were added. These, in turn, grew or were eliminated. Little remained of those first divisions. Still easily distinguishable were the ceilings of the original four stores. One was of fancily scrolled tin squares, one of none too expertly repaired plaster and the other two of narrow "ship-lap"—all now painted the same unhappy white.

Even more varied were the display fixtures. There were low bins for fresh vegetables and eight-foot, glass-doored cases for men's suits and ladies' cloaks. Even the crowded aisles had been turned to advantage with the advertisement: "So many bargains we can hardly move!"

In one sweep Hazel's nervous gaze noted and rejected a "lovely" five-piece rattan Suit of furniture for $25 and a pyramid of Shayne's

"Celery Compound — It cures old and chronic pains, makes pure, rich blood." A new plow offered "twin controls," whatever they were. Overhead canvas sign, four feet by two, read:

We'll keep tryin'
'Till we elect Bryan,
For the South will live thinly
Under McKinley.

Hazel enjoyed the medley of odors. Even the dressgoods preservatives and sawdust floorsweep meant a place to spend money. The talcums were "heavenly." And to a natural born cook like Hazel, a whole bouquet of aromas came from the meat market and grocery department.

As to many another here in Sironia, Lipscomb's stood for all that was dependable and enduring. In the all too recent days of the terrible Galveston Flood, it had been here that Reardon County's "perfectly huge" contribution had been assembled without charge. More than half of it had been donated by Lipscomb's.

Lipscomb's was so — well, dependable. More than once the remark had been made — as a sort of in-the-family joke: "Lipscomb clerks won't try to *sell* you anything: but when you practically take it away from them, they'll be awfully nice about it."

All dressgoods of better quality were carefully concealed. Hazel knew most of those counters' secrets. They held a remnant of the apricot French foulard Mrs. Balcom had worn to Miss Milly's 1888 "Last Friday." There were ten yards of the light tan merino suiting no one ("but you, Miss Hazel") had been shown since Miss Carietta had bought the first cutting in September. Above the counter were only limp folds of sickly blue cotton challis and a cheap imitation of magenta henrietta cloth.

Most prominent today of the traveling displays was that for the Erect Form Corset. It was daring enough without lettered signs alleging "No pressure against bust or abdomen"! "Gives the poise of an Empress" was another, as was "Greatest triumph of the Age."

Miss Carietta's disapproval of it was well known. She had "looked right through it." That was why Hazel examined it closely. She had no idea of buying one, had little of anything for a corset to exert pressure against. "Very nice, Irma!" she said pleasantly to Miss Grimm, the firm's oldest employee, its neatest and its most unchangeable, "but who in the world does Marshall Lipscomb think will ever dare appear in one of *those!*" She pointed to the garment on the half-dummy placarded "The new Rainy Day Skirt with flare-effect — $5.10." It would barely reach to shoe tops!

Miss Irma's high-riding nose-glasses and shinily dyed black hair glittered as she tilted them northward. "Need one ask?" Between "good women" that meant just one part of town — even if it did include the Lipscomb cottage — almost.

"Well!" Hazel paused for effect, then swept her gray skirts beneath narrow-gauge hips to sit on one of the unsteady, revolving stools with no back rest. "I really don't feel like it at all this morning, Irma — but I simply can't wait any longer to get something that will make up well — for the Thaxtons', of course. What have you? I *said* what have you, dear?"

Long trained to show no genuine astonishment, Miss Irma had done so. She rallied quickly. She placed a wrinkled finger to be-whiskered chin mole and peered through nose-glasses as if analyzing Hazel. As usual, inspiration was not long in coming. "But, of course! Just the thing! The most remarkable thing I ever heard of!"

"What, Irma?"

"*Do — you — know* — only *this* morning when I was looking over our very latest shipment — it hasn't even been priced yet — I came to an exquisite, soft, Nile-green crêpe — the prettiest of all — and I said to Marshall Lipscomb, 'If Mrs. Elliott doesn't wear this I don't know what I'll do — yes, I do — I'll just break down and bawl!' Dear, it's just the thing. If you'll wait, I'm sure he'll let me get it to show *you*. Can you wait, dear?"

Hazel looked very doubtful, then used her *you*-can-make-me-do-*anything* half-smile. Idly Hazel turned on the rattling stool. She knew her voice had carried, that it was well over the store already why she was here. She felt it. It felt — fine.

Toward the rear of Lipscomb's, looking west out on Aurelia Street, was Marshall's office. This was now enclosed by frosted glass, from wainscoting to ceiling, which could be tilted open in hot weather. Its floor was raised about four feet so that sitting at his desk of fifty or more small drawers and pigeonholes Marshall could survey the whole sales floor. In hot weather he could even bow from time to time to customers just entering "Wagons and Plows," the most remote Department.

Even more than Hazel he liked the smells here: the mothballs of textiles, the paint and grease of farm implements, the earthiness of vegetables, the leather of saddles, the food-smells, making an unmistakable alloy of their own, and the perfumes, predominantly "Yankee Clover," of the sales force. They meant a successful business to "a born merchant." Not that they did not bring some doubts. The one

thing which plagues every man who has from out himself wrought a successful business (much as it does a woman who has borne a child) is: What is to become of it after *I* am gone? Who can possibly understand, appreciate all in sweat and financial tortures it has taken for the money and countless other satisfactions it has yielded? Marshall had tried telling himself, What do I care, *I* won't be here! That wasn't true. He would be here — just as much as — as much as poor, lumbering Pyramus, and snotty-nosed "Little Teresa" and old what's-her-name gliding from bowl to bowl of morphine water! Come Doomsday, he'd be walking up and down these aisles, seen or unseen. He hoped the good Lord would let me ha'nt 'em every time they left any red floor sweep showing under the edges of counters!

Carelessly overlooked floor-sweep wasn't plaguing him today. Something about as different from it as was possible *was*. It was true he *hadn't* wanted a child by Moira. What chance would the son of a former servant girl — even one as sensible and as pretty as Moira Thorndyke Lipscomb — have in a town like this? It should be what a man *is* and *does* that counts. But he saw no chance of that ever being true in Sironia — not in the lifespan of his son, anyhow. Marshall forgot a number of things about himself as he recalled the Thorndyke men. Wild Irishmen all, not to his knowledge had *one* ever worried about the source of his next meal. If there was none, all he had to do was to decide which woman should be given the privilege of feeding him. Such resources did not make for sustained interest in business nor the patience necessary to endure its innumerable monotonies.

Again he was undergoing his first meeting with Milly after their marriages. It was not anything that she had said. She had been sweeter than ever. Damn it all, Milly had never had to *speak* to make her meaning clear. They had met in Lipscomb's — as was inevitable. Foremost in his mind was the memory of her wedding — no, right afterward. Marshall had come staggering out from thick crape myrtles as the guests gathered in the drive to speed the bride and groom on their carriage-honeymoon. He had made a speech! "La-deez'n gennulm'n!" Marshall never remembered climbing up on the iron stag in front of the Thaxton home, but there he was. "Mister Marshall Lipscomb — that's me — whee! — has the honor t'nounce *his* marriage to the former Miss Moira Thorndyke, *Miss* Sylvia's maid to you-all. To *me* she's a real woman with the gumption to marry the man she loves!" He'd never known who it was pulled him down. It had probably been the same one who had helped the explosively weeping Moira ("loaned" by the Mistress of Hadyn Hill to help out) lead him away to the Thaxton summerhouse she was later to use so embarrassingly.

That first meeting with Milly — after? Had it happened when they

were alone, it would have been as different as anything could be. She had been hurt painfully. He honestly believed she had expected him to go through the rest of his life as the rejected and yearning suitor forever watching her from behind crape myrtles and grapevines. There had been only one way open there at the Store. "Why Marshall! I *am* glad to see you—and how is—Moira?" (She hadn't, he knew, meant to put that pause in, as if the name were difficult to recall. It had put itself in.) "When are you bringing her to see us? You got married first, you know!"

"Real soon, Mrs. Thaxton, and thank you."

Sironians had expected something far more dramatic from that first meeting. Calvin Thaxton had let them down, too. Instead of being coldly jealous of Marshall, refusing him entrance to Thaxton Hill, and in other ways acting as gentlemen of the Old South sometimes did toward their wives' former suitors, he had, if anything, intensified his long time friendship with Marshall. It was said this was because neither man had found in marriage all he'd hoped for. For once, one of Nanette Lane's venomous whispers was right.

Just as surprising had been the two men's inclusion of Bill Elliott in their friendship, more surprising, really when all that about Syringa was remembered. Many would have *nothing* to do with the Blys; had "stuck by" the Elijah Thaxtons when they moved about 1865 from Syringa to the cottage (now occupied by Miss Nathalia and Trina Storrow) over near Storrow Hill. It was those "reduced circumstances" that had first given Marshall hope there was a chance for him. Hope was all there was to it. It had taken him a long time to realize that—as lovers measure time. As Marshall did now.

"Good morning, Marshall."

"Why, Hazel!" He had noticed someone advancing toward the office, but his thought had been a few blocks and many years away. "Take the easy chair. This straight-backed one is for salesmen and others I don't want to stay long."

She nodded and seated herself with quick, sparrow-like movements which wasted no time but quite a bit of energy. "Aren't you terrified at being pursued right into your lair?"

"Certainly!" He gave his deep, storekeeper's laugh. "But with fifteen clerks—it'll be eighteen next week, getting ready for the Christmas rush—to *protect* me, can even the fascinating Hazel Elliott do me harm?"

"Not unless—" Rustling gray perched on the tufted red mohair chair with the slightly soiled bits of crochet on its high back and wide arms. "You don't *want* to be saved from helpless little—me!" Homely, wizened face simpered in slightly malicious burlesque of Carietta Storrow.

He smiled, but guardedly. "This morning, I take it, you come—in triumph?"

Gold-flecked eyes became all but invisible between sallow lids. "Bill Elliott?"

"Not this time. It's all over the Store. Just the way you walked in would have told anybody! By the way, how had you *planned* to let me know?"

She released a harsh little cackle. It grated and yet made Marshall's day "three shades brighter." "I was going to ask you to wire an order for something or other and say it would have to be here in time for the thirtieth! But now that you know—" Little features were even homelier in a school child's "face," stuck-out tongue and all.

He bowed brown chin in brown hands, and shook silently. No one delighted him more than the frankly ugly, frankly feminine Hazel. His eyes followed her as she went joyously from counter to counter, obviously pricing things she had no idea of buying. Just as obviously saying that she would have to look further to find exactly what she wanted, *had* to have it "by the thirtieth."

Through a steamy, soap-smelling haze, other eyes than Hazel's had risen to Syringa. From the back door of the River Road cottage, it was only a few hundred yards by air-line. With the back of a parboiled red hand, Moira Lipscomb swept back the coarse, "horsetail" strands of hair. Doggone—if Young Tom wasn't painting that place *again* this soon! There just wasn't nobody prouder of one of them big "ancestral homes" than the second generation of a family that had *bought* into "Quality" and figured the ancestors came along with the house! Young Tom Bly had a better right than some to act up, *half* Hill Family like he was. And, another thing, he behaved himself—around *her*, anyway—a lot more like a gentleman ought to than that wild Jed Hadyn did.

Happy blush of recollection swept away some of her usual washday gloom. A good thing she loved her husband, wouldn't listen to that little Hadyn devil. S'pose she should just a *little*, to open Mister Lipscomb's eyes. But, Land o' Goshen, if she did she'd never have the nerve to tell him! He was "no true-er" to her than he wanted to be. She'd told him so more than once—for all the good it did.

She began the slow, powerful up-and-down rub of wet clothes on the zinc board. She bowed and smiled each time she went down at Tam. He'd run, as far as the rope around little watermelon belly would let him, to one end of the lean-to back porch and then to the other, playing wild monkey.

The ground was soggy. It would dry out soon enough if the sun came out, with no leaves on the trees to shade chilly ground. Some people said she was a *fool* to do her own washing now that Marshall was rich. *They* didn't know that he never considered her a part of his "rich" life. She'd had the chance to even things. She felt good all over thinking about the day Marshall found Oscar Rogan in the middle of the Square. It'd been Monthly Market Day, its most crowded time. Moira had tingled when she heard Marshall's, "You said something out of the way to my wife yesterday! What you got to say now?"

"Seems like I *was* down that way yesterday!" The Rogans were all big bluffers. They thought size and bluster were enough, never could learn, seemed like. Moira had never been so excited — nor so happy. "Any objections, Mister Lipscomb?"

"Yes. And I'm going to show 'em to you!"

"Is that ree-ee-eely so — now?"

"It is."

And it was. Never, so far as the old settlers' minds went back, had there been such a beating-up given a fellow — over a *good* woman. It hadn't taken so long, either. She had run up to throw her arms around Marshall covered with Rogan blood. He had shoved her away just the way she had known he would. But she had never felt that singing inside her so strongly as while she was following him meekly back to the cabin. She helped him clean up. She was his and he meant to *keep* her his! He treated her like he always had, but Oscar Rogan and them others didn't. Phew! After *that*, they couldn't 'a' been politer to — to Milly Thaxton! It was a little disappointing though, how he and Oscar Rogan didn't *stay* mad at each other. Marshall couldn't *stay* mad it seemed, not at people she wanted him to, anyway.

Moira poked another coarse black lock of hair over a flushed ear. Guess that bloody fight was the grandest memory she'd ever have. It had showed plain Marshall did love her, wasn't (like that hanky-panky Miss Carietta had said) just "vindicating his own honor." Moira didn't see how she could've got through all these years without that day to remember. This here in her apron pocket helped some, though.

Again she took out the invitation left by Old Fred that morning. She'd sure like to "accept" just this once. If she did, she'd watch the Thaxtons' Lance to see was it really "The Reardon Mark" had made him like he was. He surely helped Moira get the best of Marshall in an argument. All she had to say was, "All right, Mister Lipscomb, I know you're wishing you'd married *her* and had a kid like Mister Lance — instead of Tam-my!" And every time, right afterward, she'd

been sorry she'd taken such a lowdown, mean advantage, part sorry, anyhow.

Knowing she'd never be allowed to "accept," she could have unlimited daydreams about when she did get to one of *her* "Last Fridays." *Her* nephew Jed would be there, pretending he knew Moira just to speak to. Hadn't ever thought of pinching her through her own picket fence or looking at her like she didn't have any drawers on!

The washing was getting a long soaking. She replaced the invitation in her apron, but couldn't leave the Thaxton reception quite yet. Everybody'd be there — except, of course, the Elliotts. It must be kind of hard, building that great big barn of a house and having to postpone its house-warming until they'd been invited to the Thaxtons so the ones she wanted most would come. Moira really liked Hazel, as foolish as she thought some of the things she was doing to get "in society." Hazel was smart, a lot better educated than Miss Milly. Women like Miss Milly and Miss Carietta thought they'd been *born* knowing all a lady should. Now that Hazel had money again and a fine house, sure and she had a right to go with the best. If anyone asked Moira (so far no one had), this town needed more like Hazel and less talk about such subjects as "The Reardon Mark" and those it had come down to. Not that she knew Hazel *really* well —

But this wouldn't get her Monday's wash done!

CHAPTER 3

ON STORROW HILL, it was *approximately* ten o'clock. It was ten-fifteen by the seven-foot mahogany heirloom in the moss-green curve of white spiral stairs. It was ten-twelve by the Swiss cuckoo in the enormous one-story kitchen at the back. It was ten-twenty to ten-forty by all the great home's many *little* clocks. "Miz Ca'ietta's got lots o' clocks," Miss Carietta's yellow Melissa had told the other Hill Family Negroes, "so's she kin go by de one whut shows de time to suit *her*." That gave a clear idea of "Storrows' Melissa's" way of thinking and an even clearer idea of her mistress's.

Miss Carietta was not governed by situations: she governed *them*. No one would suspect that to look at her now. She had always been "delicate." Appealing in her angelic loveliness, at forty-three her figure was becoming just a little substantial for an angel's. No one for the first time beholding cherubically rounded features, softly swirling bronze-brown hair could have believed Jed's "Cousin Carietta is Dresden porcelain baked onto an armature of pig iron!" The unanswered

question had been put many times: Which is the harder-headed? Which would do battle more quickly at any hint of affront to her lone chick, Miss Milly or her fourth cousin as well as cousin-in-law, Miss Carietta? Alike in those respects, they differed in all others.

This Monday morning Miss Milly had been up for a long time with her lists and her memorandums, her engagement book and social debits and credits.

Miss Carietta still slept. It was ten-something-else by her cloisonné bedside clock. It stood on the pomegranate-carved mahogany bed table just outside pink-peony-splashed canopy of "The Reardon Mahogany" (sometimes called "The Pomegranate Mahogany") four-poster bed. With *one* exception, about which Carietta had "rather not think," although she did so often, here about her in Storrow Manor's southeast bedroom was the complete set. "The Reardon Mahogany" General Alpheus Reardon had bought for his bride, Restraint Calvin Reardon, in 1800. He'd had it oxcarted cross-country and up the Bluff across the River. It had "come down" to Julia Reardon Storrow, their eldest daughter. By 1880, this "set" had become an insignia of sovereignty. It had in feminine Hill Family eyes assumed an importance out of all relation to intrinsic worth. Not that it wasn't both handsome and beautiful, with its soft-gleaming sheen, its simple lines almost invariably called "chaste." Julia had established (or tried to) a sort of primogeniture: "The Reardon Mahogany" must always go to the first-born Storrow son. In Julia's own case, that had worked perfectly. Leonidas had been her *only* child. But Leonidas had had two sons, Sixtus, in 1848, and Webley, in 1850. According to the Julia-set precedent, Sixtus' title to *the* Mahogany was clear, when in 1883 he had married ("late" for a Storrow). Orphaned Rosaline del Valle Clanton of the *Tennesee* Clantons had accepted him only on his promise — and this is of the *greatest* importance! — that they would live at her family's historic "Clanton Cliff." In Sironia for only a month of their honeymoon, they were guests of Webley and Carietta Storrow on Storrow Hill. Naturally, Rosaline had admired profusely the Reardon Mahogany, so soon to be hers. No one could have seemed more pleased than her new "sister," the fragile-*looking*, twenty-six-year-old Carietta, of the *Louisiana* Cahoons.

Some months later, re-established at Clanton Cliff, Tennessee, Rosaline wrote giving detailed instructions for packing and shipping the prized inheritance. When "after a reasonable time" the mahogany did not arrive, she wrote Carietta again. She made her distress sound humorous, referring to "The Great Mahogany Mystery." There is no record of a reply. Two months later Sixtus wrote Webley. Webley inquired of Carietta. "Mystery, Webley? There is no mystery. Grandmother Julia never meant that any "part" of Storrow Hill should

leave it. By giving up the old home, Sixtus has relinquished rights to everything *in* it! I know *exactly* how Grandmother Julia would have wanted it." Since Storrow Hill was by that time wholly in the name of Webley, there was never any *legal* question involved. But Webley (it was said, in an appended postscript to the letter Carietta had composed for him) wrote *he* had always expected Sixtus to have the mahogany. He hoped Sixtus would understand "how matters stand here." It wasn't that Carietta would ever intentionally do anything *wrong*. It was just that she felt so deeply. She so wanted all the old things to remain in their proper setting. Webley was right about Carietta's inability to do wrong, of course. She was meticulously honest. When in her implacable serenity she had done something, that *made* it right. If Sixtus hadn't understood before, he did then.

How Rosaline, herself, avenged her loss of the sherry-highlighted treasure soon became known. Rosaline wrote Nanette Lane (who'd given a spend-the-day party for her) that all this was what one might expect. Also, that she, Rosaline, was no longer sure there had been nothing to the "scandalous canard concerning a certain Louisiana participant in a Storrow marriage." Refutation had come quickly. It had adequately demolished "the canard" as if it had never been. (There was to be no scandalous *breath* of it afterward — not for almost forty years, when it became considerably more than a "breath." Had Carietta known how it would arise to threaten her then unborn son, she would certainly have made some compromise with her pride to establish proof.) No more prescient than many another, despite her sincere belief to the contrary, she ignored it as she had Rosaline's "sisterly" retraction, patently written at Sixtus' dictation. The two Storrow brothers kept contact as long as they lived. The two sisters-in-law never met again in this life. If they have in another, it can be safely assumed neither speaks.

When the Storrow finances in the late nineties became "straitened," Rosaline might have looked down from heaven — or "up," if Carietta's own surmise was accurate — and smiled at a Louisiana Cahoon trying to "conserve my resources." She kept only three Negroes now, and herself daily gathered the six eggs her thirteen hens laid in season. For this last task, she lowered on her bronze-brown hair beginning to gray a great-brimmed gardening hat with faded La France-pink ribbon streamers. She took up a flat flower basket large enough for a gross of eggs. Arrived at the eight nests not yet rotted apart, she would hastily draw on an old green kid glove kept in the basket. She had once touched a warm new-laid egg with her bare hand, and "it was not an experience one would care to undergo again."

It was a cloisonné ten-twelve on the Reardon mahogany bed table beside the Reardon mahogany bedstead, equidistant from Reardon

mahogany dresser, and Reardon mahogany highboy. With the lattice shades down it was difficult to tell the time by the small dial that represented graphically time's relative unimportance.

Could her critics — and there were many among the socially less fortunate in Sironia — have said truthfully that placed in her position they would have been practical, humble and hard-working? Or would they have been, in the superiority of being born a Cahoon and married to a Storrow, both inconsiderate and contemptuous, which Carietta never was? Which is to say: she had been raised to know that "being of good family" imposed the duty of looking after "the others." No one ever told Miss Carietta she was wrong. If no one would tell her (and she wouldn't have believed them if they had), how was she to know?

Soon, *café au lait* Melissa would be drawing her bed curtains aside to let the revivifying steam from tiny eggshell china coffeepot awaken her. If Melissa was to be believed, "Miz Ca'ietta's de onliest 'oman evuh I see *wake up* pritty!"

Miss Carietta was consistent. She admitted it. Her every move proclaimed it. No one laughed more softly, more musically at the utter absurdity of what had been said by her deceased husband's double second cousin, Jed Hadyn: "Certainly Cousin Carietta is consistent: consistently bullheaded!"

Hers, she had been told often enough, was "the fragile loveliness of rounded, Murillo-like features." When she was awake, enormous, slightly puffy brown eyes looked softly, gently from beneath bronze hair. Now they were closed and it was formed into two thick plaits heavy on her breast. At forty-three — with certain cosmetic helps — she was more frail, if anything, more lovely. She hadn't married until she was almost thirty (looking a slightly wan nineteen). The family had been sure she never would. It was said she would have "taken the veil" had she been able to find a religious order whose habiliments were white, rose-petal pink and lavender. Her consummate modesty was the talk of "Cahoon Country" in Louisiana. It was widely known (through Cahoon Negro and laundresses) that even in the privacy of her great white bedroom at Plaisir de Cahoon Missy Ca'ietta never completely divested her "creamy-like" skin of clothing. She would slip into the upper part of one garment before allowing the lower part of that being removed to fall. Her baths were taken in specially sewn muslin or cheesecloth slips. These were hung to dry — sometimes three in one day — on her own "line" by her mulatto "body-servant," Melissa. The latter had moved from "near N'Awlins" with Miss Carietta when she had married in 1887. It was this Melissa who had launched, and proudly, on Sironia's surging seas of talk the explanation of all the cheesecloth slips hung out on

Storrow Hill "to show folks in dis heah town whut Quality *is*." Sironia could be crude. Many and regrettable were the verbal asides resulting. Especially when at the age of thirty-eight Carietta had done what no one here had ever expected of her. She had given birth. Charles came ahead of time (an offense of which he was never again to be guilty) and weighed "practically nothing." He whined piteously and continuously at a world he obviously didn't like at all at the time — and not too much later. Charles had to be fed (as his mother for the rest of her life for some reason never ceased to be proud) with a medicine dropper. Jed, already showing "that Hadyn wild streak" at fourteen, had announced seriously to the "undeniably vulgar adolescents" he fitted in with so well, "What do you mean Cousin Carietta's little Charles is measly and doing poorly? I say he's doing doggone well to've been strained through cheesecloth — twice."

If that was repeated to her, it can safely be assumed she never heard it. A Cahoon heard only what a Cahoon should hear. It was unfortunate that a Cahoon couldn't smell only what a Cahoon should. Such it was that now awakened her. It was not just the burning leaves. One of the neighborhood puppies must have deposited an old shoe therein. She winced. Was it "redolent" enough to justify ringing and thus starting the day? What *was* it she had set this morning aside for? Something to be attended to before the Negroes got started asking — She knew *now*. It was Jed she was to decide about before she rose this morning. Why was it no one ever took action in this family except herself? (When they did, she never forgave them.)

It was about Jed and Charles *both*. The two cases couldn't be *more* different — thank heaven! Except for burning leather, this was the perfect morning for making decisions in a soft, warm bed-world. Jed's case was the urgent one. That shameful canard about Cousin Nettie Vaughan Hicks had been retracted (thanks to Cousin Calvin) but now the poor maligned woman could never have the *least* control over him. They were, as she had repeatedly pointed out, enough of a handicap: Jed's brunette, bass-voiced "looks." When added to those attributes there were his sweet nature, the fact that he was a Hadyn, what wonder he was badly spoiled? What wonder that escapades which would have brought strong censure and probably severe punishment to others of his age had come to be smiled on as "that wild streak" in all the Hadyn men.

Jed, of whom so much was expected by the family, needed to be taken in hand firmly. He actually seemed to prefer his self-chosen path toward disaster. He must realize that it was not an unmitigated blessing to be forgiven everything. Already town talk was fastening the sins of others on him. "Out of whole cloth!" Miss Carietta had maintained of the story Melissa had brought in last night just

before supper. It was too late for her to think about it then: she would not have slept a wink! "Call a sheep black—!" She had passed it off. It hadn't been Jed. She didn't have to ask. Some things one knew without asking. Milt Temple had come home unexpectedly to find "—dat no-'count wife o' his'n wid Marse Jed—like dey hadn't oughter been!" Melissa had continued, "Mis Ca'ietta, it's de Lawd's own trufe. Dat Mistuh Milt Temple done pulled his six-shooter befo' he reckernized 'im. Den he bus' out *laughin'*. All he done was to chase Mistuh Jed outer de house widout'n a stitch on—'cep'n his socks and *dey* had holes in 'em! Den whut you reckon? He beat de—beat his wife ba-ad, and den clamb right in bed wid 'er hisse'f!"

"Melissa! *That* will do. You know how folks talk about poor Mister Jed. Just because he's a Hadyn, so good-looking and—full of life! If anyone asks you about this—er—canard, tell them I said there isn't a *word* of truth in it."

"I already is!"

Nobody could say her servants weren't well trained.

Someone simply must take the boy in hand. He was wild, of course, how could a mixture of Reardon, Thaxton and Hadyn lines be anything else—when young and a *boy*, of course. His baby sister, Nelia, was full of life, too. Going on three, she was sweet as an angel. Those dark eyes of hers were going to give young men uneasy thoughts some day. A little pain went round the heart under the left bronze-brown plait. Would one of those hearts be her Charles's? (How often she was to mention this "premonition" later. Jed said she was doing a little "hindsighted remembering, as through cheesecloth darkly.") Certainly, it reaffirmed a faith which needed no reaffirmation, that this *perfect* wife for Charles had been born of the *perfect* family connections at the *perfect* time. Third cousins—perfect, too! Carietta, to further such perfection, had considered taking the orphaned darling into her own home. She would have their pictures taken together every year. When those stirrings came which could no longer be passed off as brother-and-sister affection, she would have them sit at her knee while she told the story of life. By the time she had chosen just the right words it was midnight—last night. She'd deferred the marriage plans of her precious Charles (five years old last August). That about Jed, too.

Now that morning had come, she would not flinch.

Only twenty, the boy could have been held in check only by a *stern* father. Wild-eyed, romantic Philip could never have done it—even if he hadn't killed himself—so beautifully. If her own Webly had survived only two years longer, *he* might have been just the one to take Jed in hand. But dear Webley had been more like Philip than

like the needed *strong hand* which she was beginning to identify dimly.

Yes — if Jed was to realize his *great* possibilities, to be kept from "ruining his life," from "humbling the family" and especially from getting "involved with an unsuitable girl," there was only *one* who could "bring him around." Could there be two minds as to who that was?

The curtains stilled. Soft Murillo features lost their impatience, became the angelic statue of Melissa's matutinal devotions.

Nearer drew steamy, fragrant, tinkling tray. Morning's most heavenly moment was just beyond drawn, peonied curtains. Miss Carietta turned. Her mattress didn't creak, it cooed. As on every morning there came voiced softness, so low, so sweet that no silence could resent it, "Mornin', 'Lissa!"

"Good mawnin', Miz Ca'ietta!"

The troubles of a world in sore need of proper guidance were about to be taken up afresh — and firmly.

The object of much concern agreed with Miss Carietta about the best use for early daylight. Any other similarity in their tastes was not readily apparent. Jed, too, lay abed, high up in Hadyn Hill's top-heavy, gray frame replacement of its original classic manor. His tower room was small and square and cold. Under three crazy-quilts and sunk deep in a feather bed, he curled in hibernation warmth and dreams. His were the dreams no man much less a young one wants interrupted.

The knocking on his door changed to pounding. When that brought no answer, the door opened and the bloated, middle-aged face of Cousin Nettie Hicks Vaughan showed around the edge. "Jed-dy!" No answer. For the first time, she came inside his room to stand looking at flushed young forehead above wadded bedclothes on wadded pillow. Wavy black hair was long for a boy's but it surely did set off the virile handsomeness of heavy features. The magnificent body she found disturbingly evident even under all those covers. No wonder he got in so much trouble. No wonder people were always blaming her for not making him behave. The Lord knew she'd tried. She'd appealed to his pride, told him how a Hadyn ought to act. In order to get him to stay home nights, she'd tried to improve his quick mind, had read Dickens aloud. Was she using the right means — for a growing boy? Puffy, round hands fluttered about puffy, round body and up about too curly, greasy hair. She ought not waste any more time. There was enough in this house to keep ten women busy twenty-four hours out of the —

Jed had laughed a little and flopped over on his face exposing almost the whole of muscular white back. Just beginning to show was the black hair of powerful forearms. Of all things — not a stitch on under the covers! Shaped more like a feather bed than a woman (as Jed had told Tess Temple), forty-two her last birthday, Nettie Vaughan stood, she told herself, "embarrassed as a girl." Jed's for Jedediah! she thought. Supposed to mean "Beloved of God" but in this case it's "Beloved of every hussy in town." She leaned over to pat one great bare shoulder. "*Jed*-dy!"

Was it the touch of a woman's hand? Something had made the smooth-muscled figure sit up with a loud crunching of old springs. Great black eyes sprang wide open. Their gaze landed directly in hers. "Wh — what — is — ? Uh!" Wide-awake he had with a modesty long forgot in one motion jerked his knees to his chest and flung the covers over all but the swirl of black hair and one slightly bloodshot eye. "Something wrong? Nelia got the croup again?"

"No. Just time to get up — Jed-dy."

"Don't call me — that." It always amazed her, the deep bass timbre of so young a voice.

"All right, Jed — I — I thought you'd gone. It's almost eleven o'clock and a *Monday!* You know the niggers out to the farm won't get anywhere with fall plowing if you're not there to oversee — "

"Eleven — mmmm! Why didn't my clock go — " He started to spring out of bed, remembered in time to crouch back holding the covers high. "Thanks, Cousin Nettie. I'll be down in a — Oh! I *knew* something was wrong. No work *today*. I let the niggers off for a funeral. Might as well — they won't strike a lick of work. I meant to — I *did* tell you. When I left last night. You were in the porch swing — "

"Oh! Was that what you said?" Nettie Vaughan was not very good at dissembling. "I'm so sorry I waked you up. Goodness knows you were out late enough to need sleep."

"Yes'm." He saw stolid resentment in vacuous, faded face. He buried his head, would keep it buried until the old sow cleared out!

"Jed-dy — Jed?" (Jee-hos-a-phat, she was setting all that blubber down on the side of his bed!) "I'm just trying to make a real home for Nelia and you. It just *breaks* my heart to see you doing — the way you are." She got no response. "I've had a sad life, myself. Lige started out like you right after we got married. The wilder he got — the wilder he wanted to be, seemed like." Her sobbing came from deep in wobbly bosom. One hand moved out toward his covered shoulder, touched it, withdrew.

Jed was getting mad, mostly because he didn't know what to do. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. He hadn't wanted

Cousin Nettie or anybody else to move in here. But he'd been only eighteen — then. "There must be a woman in the house," all the relatives had agreed when Cousin Carietta had told them to. If he'd just been a few years older he'd have refused to let old She-whale Hicks step foot on the place. If he had, Cousin Carietta would have made him close the house, had one cousin take in Nelia and another him. It would have been just his luck to be "taken in" by Cousin Carietta! He'd hated Nelia at first for killing their mother, but after their father had ridden over the Bluff, it hadn't been any time before he found himself loving Nelia more than he did anyone else.

Certainly, there had to be some white woman around. And it had to be a relative, of course. It was just the worst luck in the world that not six months before, Cousin Lige Vaughan had had all he could stand of Cousin Nettie. He'd left for his law-office one morning and never got there. That's all anybody knew — except Tess Temple claimed she heard from "a woman friend of mine" that she and Lige were a long ways off, doing fine. "That solves everything nicely," Cousin Carietta had agreed for all concerned. "It will take care of poor Nettie and the Hadyn children, too. Of course, *I'll* be in and out to see everything goes well." She had been, all right — at least five times in two years. Cousin Nettie did exactly as she'd been told. Were he and Nelia to be saddled with this hunk of mutton forever?

"Pl-lease answer me, Jed." A fat hand smoothed his hair. "I *want* to help you. You know what folks are saying. Blaming me, too, for not making a better home for you-all. Do you know what Oscar Rogan said about you in that Stag saloon just yester — "

"How come *you* there?"

"Jedediah Hadyn! If it wasn't my *bounden* duty — "

"I'll run an ad in the *Sentinel* — say you're raising us right. Now get out and let me — "

"Jed, my — dear, we — you and me — we got to have an understanding *some*time."

"About what?" He shook her hand from his hair. It fell to his bare neck. He shuddered angrily, and she withdrew it.

"Jed, every boy's got to — grow up. I'm not like some of our cousins I could name. A healthy, growing boy can't behave himself like — like a girl! But, Jed, I was *so* ashamed when I heard. If it'd been almost anybody but that low-down Milt Temple, even if he did know better than to lay his hand on a Hadyn — "

"But not his *foot!*"

"Jed! He might have done something! And the family name'd be in the mud — "

"Been there plenty times before!"

"Jedediah Hadyn!"

"All right I'm sorry, very sorry — very, *very* sorry. Now will you, *please,* get out of here?"

"No! We're going to have a sensible understanding before I stir from this — "

"If you don't get out, I'm going to hop out this bed and put you out — and I haven't got a thing on — "

"You can't bluff *me* like you do everybody else."

Anger went cold. The old bitch knew he *wasn't* bluffing. Did she *want* him to jump out naked? All over, Jed Hadyn was blushing.

"That's Cousin Nettie's sweet boy. What I had in mind — "

"I hear Mammy coming up. Tell her to bring my tray in — "

She flopped to her feet, and ran — lightly for such bulk — to the tower-room stair landing. One look down. The stair was empty. As she flopped around his door was slammed in her face. A chair back was tilted forward under the doorknob. "Be down for breakfast in two shakes of a — Rogan's tail!" His bass laugh did many things to many women.

Down in the large kitchen, Mammy Henderson shushed Nelia in her play-pen, and heard the door slam to "Marse Jed's rume." "Hmm! Dat ole *thing!" She* didn't have *no* business up yonder. Old enough to be his maw and look how she was acting! If she kept on, Mammy was going to Mistuh Calvin and tell him plenty.

All this time Mammy was "working up" the noon meal. Pine-walled, oak-floored kitchen was as big as the front parlor. "Lemme see whut I needs frum de sto'-rume." "Dat ole *thing*" was coming down with them keys jangling at her belt. Hmmph! She continued the almost constant, not always silent conversation with herself: Nothing had *ever* been locked up heah in Miz Sylvia's time. Now everything was. If it wasn't fer Mammy's two white lambs — Marse Jed wasn't nothin' but a lamb, for all his messin'-around — she'd walk right out of dis heah kitchen and nev-vah come back. Dey was plenty other folks wanted her. Fifty was gettin' on up Zion's hill, but she could outwork and outcook all dese trifling gals 'cep'n, mebbe, her own Josie. She'd trained Josie special for Miz Milly.

"Bis-kit!" crowed Nelia, pulling up by the pen's railing. "Bis-kit, Mam-mee!"

"Dat's right, honey. Mammy fixin' fer to cook you a biscuit ri-ight now. You an' me's de smartes' members o' *dis* family." She stopped what she was doing to stoop and kiss loudly each little hand clenched on the railing. "Po' li'l muvverless dove! Mammy'll make it up to

you. Mammy an' yo' Br'er Jed, we's bofe jus' crazy 'bout *you!*"

"Bis-kit!"

"Sho'! Dat ole thing says you don't unnerstan' me. You does though. Wanter know sump'n' else? She makes me sick to my stummick! Don't pay you *no* mind till somebody comes 'round. Denn, can't sweet-talk you enuf. Hit's mah sweet Nelia dis — an' my sweet Nelia dat — de ole bitch bastuhd! I hadn't oughter said dat — and I hopes de Lawd'll *ex*-cuse me. But He knows I was right! Always tellin' Mistuh Calvin she's just scrapin' by wid her good manage*ment* on de money he brings her frum de ee-state. Hmm! *I* knows whar she's hiding de mo'n half she *don'* spend! An' I kain't tell. She'd say I was lyin' and dey'd hafter believe *her!* But I can tell *you*, sugahlump. *You* unnerstan's!"

Nelia's response to this confidence was to hoist one small shoe up on the rail. "Stop dat!" Mammy grunted to her knees beside the play-pen. "Hit ain't ladylike. Whut you think folks goner say when you's growed up if you go 'roun' h'istin' yo' laig up datterway? You gotter act ladylike when you's a Hadyn — like you an' me — '

"Mammy!"

"Yas'm?" The big black woman pulled up, curtseying as she always did to anyone of the family, even to Miss Nettie. "Nelia done tole me she want bis-kit fer her dinner."

"Ver-ry smart, I'm sure. But you'll do better to attend to your cooking more and less to giving her everything she asks for. Heaven knows no one could love her more than *I* do, but it'll make her selfish if we — humor her constantly. Don't you give her another thing to eat between meals unless I — "

"No'm! I needs some pertaters and flour and lard — "

"I gave you enough yesterday for two days."

"Di-id yuh, Miz Nettie? Why, you sho' nuff did. But some o' Mistuh Jed's hands done drap in on de way to de fune'al. Dey was sho' surprised I wasn't let off — " and when that did no good at all, "Dey say dey was hongry. Marse Jed don't nev-vuh let me turn *one* of 'em away — hongry — "

"Yes — I know. I'll speak to him again about it. Not the *faintest* idea of the value of a dollar! The waste that goes on in this house! If I didn't plan, plan, plan — scrimp, scrimp — "

"Yas'm." Mammy was getting her old wooden breadboard out of the cupboard, and watching, too. It'd be just like dat ole thing to look behindst the stove this morning. It was the first time Mammy had put anything there to take home with her — since day before yis-tiddy. Dat ole thing didn't have de sense to know cooks that'd been wid Quality for years was expected to "tote." She fair blistered de hide off Mammy for doing it — that is, whinn she'd

ketched her! Dat sweet Miz Sylvia — dead and buried fer two years, God res' 'er sweet soul — hadn't never so much as put 'er pritty little foot in de kitchen. She'd knowed Mammy'd look after things. But dis ole —

"Bis-kit!"

"Let go! My *clean* dress!" A quick slap of the grasping baby hand was followed by a loud wail. Hardly audible was the grunt of held-in fury from Mammy: black or not, some day 'fo' long, she was goner *hafter* tell. She'd asked de good Lawd to help her put it off, caze Marse Jed were *so* young to have to handle dem triflin' field hands. He was too easy on 'em — givin' 'em de *whole* day fer dat fune'al! Dat wasn't no way to farm. An' if all she heared 'bout de ee-state money wus true — well, he *better* be thinkin' 'bout sump'n besides de gals. Most of 'em was ole enough to know better — or, leastways, cover-up better! Scan'lous! But he always was de cutes' thing — 'cep'n Nelia.

Miss Nettie came back out of the storeroom. She emptied her arms on the scrubbed-wood table nearest enormous wood range. A pointed, squint-eyed look told Mammy *she* "knew where things were going."

Miss Nettie locked the storeroom door with a loud click. "Enough for *two* meals there." She began rechecking in plain view. The only way to handle these old servants handed down like heirlooms was not to let them impose on you. If you weren't careful, they'd run over you, take *every*thing off the place. With "poor Nettie Hicks Vaughan" to keep them in line? She smiled. Milly Thaxton and that Carietta Storrow thought they were *so* charitable. Their way of helping a poor relative was to allow her just enough to keep a few rags to her back. Wouldn't they like to know how much she'd saved out on groceries, put away where it belonged? So far she hadn't found any way to get rid of Mammy, but she would and — "What's that rattling sound, Mammy?"

"I didn't heah nothin', Miz Nettie!"

"Never do!" She waddled out with, "So *much* to be done, and nobody to do it but me."

Into tiny mouth Mammy slid a strictly forbidden bit of bacon rind. Baby gums needed sump'n to chaw on. She raised the window behind the high-backed range. Her red bandanna-ed head almost collided with another, that could not have been any blacker but seemed so on account of the white headcloth and white dress. The rattling signal of water gourd hung outside which Miss Nettie had heard had said: Come to the stove window soon as you can!

Mammy reached out and fondly wiped a smear of flour from the shining black face of towering "Black Josie." Almost six feet tall, she had shoulders like a man's. "Whut you want, Josie?"

"Mistuh Calvin done *made* her invite dem Elliotts!"

"You *know* dat ain't so!"

"Swar tuh God!" Josie's toothy grin was magnificent, her enormous black hands pounding wide flat hips as she hurried on with her news. Josie warn't no pretty gal, wid dat flat nose an' dem big ears, but she was jus' 'bout de han'somest! Now Josie was ready to move on to tell Melissa. "Dat's all I knows — right now, Mammy."

"Well, I nevuh! Josie, is Lilybeth come in yit?"

"Yas'm. I stopped by — on de way ovah heah lak you tole me. She were jus' comin' in. Dat new yaller dress was all tore."

"Lawd! Lawd, You done sent dat Lilybeth to *try* me! Say whar she bin dis time, Josie?"

"No'm — not a wuhd!" Josie's eyes were glistening with admiration for the wayward Lilybeth. "Whoevuh 'twas mus'a give her enuf fer a new dress, 'caze she wuz singin' dat song you tole 'er *not* ter. Lilybeth don' sing hit less'n things goes jus' zackly right."

"Dat's a fac'. Dat chile! Ev'y time I tries ter reason wid'er she say she's no chile, she's a ma'ied woman. An' she *mought* be! But hit ain't right de way she dumps all dem chillun on me ter raise."

"Mos'ly dey don' live long, 'cep'n Luella an' Ja'ed. You's crazier 'bout *him* dan about *any* of yo' own."

"Hush yo' mouth, Josie. It ain't so. But he is de sweetes' li'l thing."

"Dar you goes — just lak I said." Josie's grin as she ran down the back slope of Hadyn Hill showed she was just as foolish about five-year-old, mulatto Jared as Mammy.

It was Mammy's shame, the way Lilybeth carried on. She hadn't never held down a real steady job, the longest had been for three years wid de Elliotts. The only reason Lilybeth went to the meetin'house of a Sunday was, God fergive 'er, to show herself off to the menfolks in all her pretty clothes. Lilybeth was a bad girl — but she was Mammy's own flesh and blood and she sure were gen'rous wid her money when she had it, *wharevuh* it come from.

If whitefolks had the family troubles Mammy did, they would have give up — long ago. But niggers got good sense. When things git too much fer 'em, dey just overlooks 'em — instead o' fightin' to make 'em de way dey wants 'em. If white folks could jus' learn dat — !

As so often before — and afterward, Tam and his mother sat alone on their back stoop. Hugging him close in mild November twilight, she was whispering, confiding. That he could understand only a small part of all she said at times like this did not matter, for it became a part of his thinking and helped him understand — later — a lot of things.

Pop was a man who had "loved above his station," although Tam didn't know where Pop's station was, nor why he had got up on the roof. Mama did make it plain that Pop was ashamed of both of them and that "a spite marriage is a terrible thing, never hurts anybody else as much as it does the two who make it — remember that, Tammy!"

He mustn't tell anybody, not ever — but Pop hadn't wanted Tam when the stork came around with him! Mama had had to manage — never mind how — now. That was why Tam was so much younger than high-and-mighty Miss Milly's Lance — God have mercy on the poor thing! That was why Pop kept them living here long after they could have afforded as fine a home as any in this town. How could any be finer, Tam had asked — with the City Dump only two blocks away and his "nigger" playmates barely four, on meandering River Road? Mama had said he'd understand someday.

Right now she seemed to think it was enough for him to know she was the most mistreated wife in the world, although it took only a flat-handed spank from Pop to make her seem the happiest.

With all that out of the way, she was getting to stories Tam wanted to hear. In the dusk of chinaberry trees and the soft sounds of stilling bird-chirps from the River just over there, she was telling him "true stories" about *them*. Often he was to wonder when it had been he had first heard about "The Reardon Curse" that had fallen on Pyramus Thaxton and the mother of Little Teresa and — now on Mister Lance.

All the time she told him these things she fingered her rosary. She had given up "the Church" because her husband had wanted her to, but her beads and her Tam took the place of the Confessional she missed so much. Sitting thus, she told Tam once, she could almost see great cathedral doors opening to her and Tam — and sometimes to Pop, too. (Many, many times Tam was to wonder, many times inconsolably, how things would have turned out with her if she'd had *her* church instead of Pop's to lean on when *that* time came.)

Now she was getting to "the Syringa part." In the gloom she pointed up to the heights visible across the River. The first of the County's big homes, it was almost exactly like one in Natchez, she'd heard. Old Alpheus Reardon had built it "way back yonder," and there he and his reportedly headstrong Restraint had raised three of the children born to them. These three had been Julia, Sironia (for whom the town abuilding was named) and Temperance (mother of the tragic Pyramus). All dead fifty years or more, those three "Reardon girls" and their descendants had reached out and encompassed all that the eye (from Syringa) might behold — for a time.

One had married Pluto Hadyn; one, Hugh Storrow, and the third, Gabriel Thaxton (good friend to Tam's grandfather and the center

of one of the town's many "mysteries"). All these names piled on names, with a smattering of the inter-kinships, had Tam all "bumfuzzled" until Mama told him, "Don't even try to remember 'em all, honey. You'll be reminded by their kin when it's necessary — and a lot of times when it ain't."

As each "Reardon girl" married, a home had been built for her here in the valley, on one of the three knolls known as "Hills." Julia Reardon Storrow chose the southwest "Hill," diagonally across the flat from the River's bend. Sironia, when she became a Hadyn, selected the one about half a mile south and downstream from the bend. That left the third and last for Temperance and Gabriel Thaxton. In twenty years, the town built up between their hills, then began its spread east, across the River. This was after the railroad had come, its tracks a "nuisance" just two block south of Hadyn Hill. The town could not grow north because of the Bluff nor (at that time) west into rocky wasteland. It did grow south and now in 1900 was several times *wider* than it was long — and growing more so. The census of some twenty thousand was wrong, Mama said, because nobody ever *really* died here.

For one, nobody was more alive in imaginations than "romantic" Philip Reardon Hadyn "gone but not forgotten" about two years. When his Sylvia divided her last look (in *this* life, that is) between the newborn Cornelia (always to be known as "Nelia") and her distraught husband, he had spent the next eight hours in the bedroom they still shared. From it he would not permit "the dear simulacrum" to be removed. It had been an unusually bright day, Mama said, but he had drawn the shutters — how Mama loved this part! — lighted eight candles, and used those eight hours, or most of them, to compose poetry. One line was supposed to go, "Pause, thou, love on cedared heights, thy pinions spread, for me." Polished through sixteen (some said twenty) versions, he had copied the lines in a hand as if engraven on sterling silver. He had placed them on the "simulacrum's" still bosom — where they could be plainly read by all, mean old Mrs. Lane often said afterward. Then Philip had mounted his bay stallion to swim the River behind Hadyn Hill. ("Why, Mama? They's a bridge only a block —" "Shut up, Tammy!") He had been seen to give spur to bay flanks, charge past Syringa and over the Bluff! Here Mama always cried, but seemed real happy. The only time Pop had mentioned it in Tam's hearing, he'd ended with, "Oughter been ashamed of himself, leaving a just-born baby girl and that eighteen-year-old Jed who needs a father's strong hand if son ever did!"

Tam would not have been surprised to meet Philip Hadyn "charging" hell-for-leather down Main Street — as Lilybeth Henderson swore *she* had — "Twict."

Mama's next story was an old favorite, and the madder she was with Pop the more stories she told Tam about "the Hill Families." This one was about "Ole Pyramus," who'd died at the age of sixteen, in 1846.

Why he'd been like he was nobody else was sure, but Mama was: all the families who thought themselves too good to marry anybody else had "at least one afflicted child." The only "outsider" to see Pyramus had been a boy who had shinnied up Thaxton Manor's back drainpipe. He had slid all the way back down to run for home: "He's mo' like a ape than a man — got arms long as legs — all covered with hair and no nose at all hardly in his face." Encouraged by a mother alive to the importance of the news, he'd added, "His eyes is like live coals of fire!"

Somewhat more reliable (although Tam believed the other implicitly) was that "the Thaxtons' physician" was said to have revealed in-his-cups that Pyramus was "a particularly ingratiating animal." Some of the Thaxton niggers were said to have let it out that Marse Pyramus was "as 'fectionate as a puppy" when a child. Not so in adolescence. "Precautionary" two-inch bars of iron had been put across the head of the stairs to the observatory room on top and over its windows. That same physician was supposed to have warned Temperance that her deformed son was "as much man as any other — physically, will be no respecter of kinship!"

Alone in the house the night of "the big storm of '46," she had heard his guttural, heart-wrenching "Ma-a-ma — Ma-a-ma!" from the top floor. She rose, would have disobeyed the doctor to go to him, but with sheet-flashes of lightning came the sounds of iron bars being ripped from their sockets. She should have fled, but "couldn't from my *own* flesh and blood!" — still hoped he would be as he had been, until from the base of the observatory stair she saw night-gowned, hairy bulk frenziedly wedging itself between bars toward her. He lunged down, would have fallen upon her had she not run for the only help available now — and fired.

He struck the floor, writhing (Tam practiced this realistically), the wound, *her* wound red and spreading through his gown torn to strings. He spoke but once more, from head cradled in her arms. "Pretty — pret-ty, Ma-ma. See — see pret-ty — light-ning." That was why he'd broken out — not the other —

It might have been better had her husband not had one of those "presentiments," which apparently were so frequent in the old families in those days, and turned back from his journey; better if suffocating remorse had been let drain all life from the tormented mother instead of nearly all. What little was left helped wall her off from reality the rest of her days, and there were years of them. There was

no evidence that she made any attempt to lessen their awfulness, nor to spare others their rightful share of *her* "cross." Dead "these many years" she could still be seen by those so "gifted." Always in "the dead of night," wringing her hands she strode, apparently inexhaustible, in and out of the great crape myrtles of Thaxton Hill.

Not nearly so exciting was Renée Ledoux (great-grandmother of Jed Hadyn's first wife, yet-to-be). Mama didn't know what this Renée's "cross" had been, but there was no doubt she had one: all the women in *that* family did! The year around, it was said, winter and summer, her garments had been long and flowing and immaculately white. In death, they still were. Waxen pale (it was alleged, in whispers usually), she had waist-long, straight black hair and seemed "to just float-like acrosst the floor." As when living, she continued consistently to sip from a Venetian-glass cup of absinthe, refraining (it seemed) only long enough to dip long white fingers in one of numerous (all invisible) Dresden bowls of "morphine-water." (Many were to be the times, Nelia was to tell Tam, when she and Bessie — but more often, Leah — played at being Aunt Renée in trailing sheets, using black dress fringe from uncounted old attic trunks for hair and stalking rigidly from room to room, sipping "absinthe" and pressing grimy little fingers into glasses of water and then to their tiny tongues, with mournful eyes walled back.)

There just didn't seem to be any end to the Hill Family dead who had gone to what was certainly the most active "heavenly rest" yet known. Even Mammy Henderson, usually far more reliable than her totally *un*reliable Lilybeth, warned ominously about such as: "Ole Gen'l Pluto done stood at de foot o' my bed las' night an' tole me he goner ha'nt ever'body whut has anything to do wid raisin' de taxes on any o' de Hills!" It was a Hill Family pride, one of many, that not a member of it had ever feared death. Why, indeed, should he?

The one story Tam *didn't* like was that of "little Teresa." He thought she was a "mess," and many another agreed with him, if hardly with the same word. She had been the first and in no way distinguished child of the Elijah Thaxtons. In 1860, at the age of six years and three months, "the angelic creature" had been drowned — "quite suitably," Jed Hadyn had once exploded, in a lily pond. No one of that day thought the bereaved mother's behavior morbid or could have changed it if they had. Golden-haired, expensively embalmed Little Teresa was placed in a specially built mausoleum of white marble in Jasmine Mound. Ornamented with marble folds and marble torches, it was just large enough to enclose with its bronze doors the table-high silver-plated little casket and a marble bench next the doors. This end of the coffin opened down. Thereafter, until the coming of "Little Milly," the distraught mother went every morn-

ing "to my sleeping darling," just as she had her years *in* Syringa. She would unlock, swing wide the bronze doors and seat herself. Then she would lower the casket end and lay out the contents of her reticule. "Spun gold" hair she would brush back from childish "alabaster brow," then oil it lightly, first with comb and then with brushes, three different sizes. Each morning she arranged the soft strands a little differently, using a wide variety of flowers or ribbons in the waves over tiny ears. Once each week she washed the hair with unsweetened lemonade.

"Why didn't she use *orange*ade sometimes, Mama?"

"Hush, Tam." When Mama didn't know answers, she hushed him up, so she could talk about things she did know the answers to, mostly things he didn't understand and had learned not to ask too much about. Poor Mama, she had no idea how much he would remember, how it would to a great extent affect his whole life: things like the feud between Miss Milly and Miss Hazel, all this about churches and mortal sin. But he could sit through them, for before long Mama would get back to the shooting of the ape-man, to the horse charging over the Bluff—

"What'd they do with the *horse*—afterwards, Mama?"

"Hush, Tammy."

CHAPTER 4

BARELY WARMED by his bedroom fire (kindled by one of Fred's innumerable boys, who had as usual awakened him in the process), Calvin shivered as he ran lightly down the stair curve to the lower hallway. He turned left into the shadowy dining room. It was "good and warm" here, just right for a "comfortable" breakfast.

Candles lit on red mahogany suggested rather than revealed the Burgundy red of walls, of heavy curtains and portières. Outlined only faintly was the overhead mahogany "punka," a great lyre-shaped fan hinged from the ceiling, to be swung back and forth in the hot months by a cord. A Negro child tugging at its loose end would provide the power — when awake.

Milly never saw Calvin before breakfast — except on days which had "too few hours." This was one of them. She had got Lance off for today's fishing, and was already seated at the foot of the table. In white woolen dressing gown and gathered cap, she not only felt

but looked the very busy mistress of Thaxton Hill at this, the high point of her year. Under too apparent affability there was a suggestion of what lay beneath.

It had not been an easy choice given her by Calvin that early Sunday morning almost four weeks before. In her place, Cousin Carietta would have refused, would have carried off the absence of her husband — if it had come to that — at her reception somehow, even though everyone knew the truth. That was just *one* of the differences between them. Milly knew there were times when it was better to give in. Not that Calvin had been allowed to think for one minute that she had forgotten!

Today, "the last Friday in November," found her with a *whole* house to decorate — and only twenty or thirty to help her. She hadn't really needed to get up this early, nor to come down. But how else would Calvin appreciate what she had to put up with, how little trouble their entertaining was to *him?*

She let him kiss her cheek. She was most pleasant and considerate all through breakfast. When he left for the Bank, she managed a smile which should have wrung his heart — probably had. Calvin loved her — profoundly, really had suffered over this Elliott thing, but who would know it to look at him? She had considered "barring him from her room," but the Thaxton men had always seemed to take unwarranted advantage of that time-honored procedure. She certainly didn't want to get Calvin started on anything of that kind. She knew she had behaved very well, was entitled to hope now the Elliotts *would* come, would commit some frightful *faux pas*. No, just Hazel. Bill, himself, really did quite well — for a tramp booted drunk off a circus train in a brawl!

Much nearer for worry was the actual decorating. It was hard work, but she believed she'd actually enjoy it if it were not for one thing. Everyone has his burdens, but who else had Cousin Carietta on hand *every* year to "help"? It did no earthly good to insist she really shouldn't, had already done her share many times over. She, too, got up on "last Fridays." Dear Carietta, so genuine in her belief that everything would be "in the best of good taste" only with her to show the way. There was no telling her different; she suffered so exquisitely at the least unpleasantness. Not that she didn't always rally in time to take full charge.

The family's Leaning-Tower-of-Pisa (ancient, camel-faced Cousin Nathalia) never missed an opening to say that while she was devoted, deeply devoted to both of them, Milly and Carietta should *never* have to work together on anything because they were too much alike! To Miss Milly, that was "an outrageous statement." It seemed (to Cousin Nathalia, of course) that while both Milly and Carietta had a "fine

sense of family," each was "too set in her ways," too sure of her own infallibility; each was a "hen-with-one-chick," and each — on and on and on. About the only difference Cousin Nathalia would admit was that while Milly made no such attempt Carietta kept her convictions under a thick coating of sweetness and a sort of fragile, completely false helplessness that *insured* getting what she wanted. Not even Cousin Nathalia thought they looked alike. Carietta had the height Milly didn't, and large, just-born brown eyes, Botticelli features and bronze-gold hair. Much of that beauty escaped Milly at the time of year Carietta was due "to help decorate."

Arrive she did, as feared. She came in her open carriage, followed by a wagonload of her Negroes, all ages. Already there were far more than were needed.

"Millicent!" She swept creamy white serge skirt across dusty porch.

"Carietta! You *shouldn't* have gone to all this trouble — really! But whatever in the world would I do without you!" As they embraced, each devoted an affectionate look to taking in the other's toilette. Miss Milly's included white shirtwaist and navy skirt; Miss Carietta's, spotless light cream coat-suit. So tightly corseted, neither was capable of reaching above shining pompadour.

"You are using the Maréchal Niels this year," tenderness was waning with a withdrawing of arms and slight creaking of whalebone, " — of course!"

"I think *not*, dear. We used them last year, remember?"

"To be sure! But they are *so* much prettier, and," she did not think to add that she was wearing lavender satin this year which with her bronze-gold hair *demanded* the yellow-tissue roses, "you know how one *feels* what is fitting — a sort of intuition — Put my chair in the hall — *here*, Sam'l!" Cousin Carietta again had brought her own chair necessary to "support my poor back."

From command post in the hallway, she could see into all the four big rooms on the first floor and superintend as well the twining of inevitable slick-leaved smilax in upcurving balustrade. "Sam'l! Have three of *my* niggras bring in the smilax. Millicent, why don't you *rest* while you — *You!* Put the canvas I brought — *here!* Must protect Miss Milly's *beautiful* carpet! Every time I see its luster, I envy you more, dear! No, *you!* (to one of the Thaxton Negroes) — that settee stays *down*stairs. And, you — "

Miss Milly's lower lip was firmly between little teeth. Every year at exactly this time she swore to herself she'd never entertain again so long as Carietta Storrow was able to come over. All the servants' heads were down to hide delight at the ever new miracle there was someone who could "phaze" Miss Milly. It was either be phazed or have Carietta's large brown eyes well up in tears, fragile little hands clutch at what was, allegedly, fragile little heart.

"Milly, dear, you sit here. You simply mustn't tire yourself out. Such a — a tornado of energy! While I never seem to get anything done. Watch my niggras to see — Needn't bother, really, I've already told them how to put up the smilax. 'Just like last year — just the way Miss Milly wants it,' I told them. I'll be back in a moment, dearest, never fear!"

She ascended the curving stair, it seemed, only by a white hand pulling her along mahogany rail. Carietta did make a beautiful picture, almost as beautiful as she had at nineteen. Small wonder, when it was her life's work. Looking beautiful *and* managing the universe! Her steps were not audible on the heavy blue carpet, only the rustle of the cream serge. Carietta would never get it through her lovely head that the Storrow finances, once so plentiful, had begun dwindling even before Webley died. Poor Ca-alvin had tried repeatedly to tell her. Always she smiled "the Cahoon smile" as if to say: You poor man — as if any of *us* could ever pinch pennies!

All about, Negroes were bursting bales of "wild" and "florist" smilax. Long tendrils of tough stems with slick, pointed, dark green leaves were being separated and laid to themselves, only to become again entangled the first time another touched them. Negro women on ladders or kitchen chairs were hanging the vines. "Don't *mash* them into place, Melissa!" Miss Milly called back into the dining-room, "Just toss them — as if they *grew* there!"

"Yas'm — Miss Ca'ietta tole me. Like dis?"

"Yes — something like that." Oh, well — she'd get Carietta and her crew out of the house, and then go over the whole thing. "Good Lord!" Waddling up the front steps, her thick arms full of those common yellow button chrysanthemums, came Cousin Nettie! She was a good soul if ever there was one, despite those old rumors, but with just about as much taste as the bale of hay she invariably suggested.

"I know I'm late, Cousin Millicent. Can you *ever* forgive me?" She gave the helpless Milly a hug of mashed chrysanthemums and noticeably perspiring flesh. One could count on Nettie to perspire when everybody else was shivering! "But better late than never, I always say. And I've brought everybody on the place to help." She had. In filed Mammy, two other Negro women, three negro men and Nelia. "Just you tell me what you want done!"

"How thought-ful, Nettie! And it so-o nice of Jed to remember to send over the cedar without being — "

"I've reminded him — every day this month, the little dickens! Mammy, quit wasting so much time on that child!"

"Come to Aunt Milly, precious. Mammy, you go help where you — think — you can do the most good. How's *my* little girl?"

The naturally affectionate little lump snuggled close. "Bis-kit!"

"But, dar-ling, you've just had breakfast — hasn't she, Nettie."

"Yas'm!" Mammy called from the back parlor, then went on telling Josie she didn't know "de fust thing 'bout hangin' dat smile-axe."

Milly was enjoying the feel of baby fingers in her gray-brown curls. It was almost a pain, one so exquisite she could not separate its anguish from its delight. She and Calvin might have had a daughter like this — but then when he was this age their Lance had promised to be — and he *had* turned out to be a *fine* boy, was developing into a fine man. "What was it, Nettie, dear?"

"I said that after niggers have been with a family so long they get to thinking they own — Oh, good morning, Cousin Carietta!"

"Why, Cousin Nettie, I'd given you up. But, fortunately, we have more help than we know what to do with, haven't we, Millicent? So don't feel badly about it, dear." She patted Nettie on her dark brown coat. At least, she went through the motions. Miss Carietta's touch was so light that one could seldom be positive that actual contact had occurred. "And — Nelia!" Like a single perfect lily on its no longer too slender stem, Carietta bent with perfect grace to kiss, or almost-kiss, the dark-haired, dark-eyed baby.

"Bis-kit!"

"She mean," Mammy loomed in the door of the back-parlor, carrying a long spray of smile-axe, "— she sho' glad to see *you*, Miz Ca'ietta."

"Of course, her is!" She knelt as if at *the* manger.

"Oh, how I wish — er — Raphael could paint you, Carietta!" Miss Milly, a trifle wearily, had remembered in time.

"That's what dear Webley used to say!" Pale lids closed and perfect, if colorless, lips quivered for one lovely moment. "Oh, Melis-sa!" so softly it was never clear how anyone heard her. "Bring Master Charles in. I left him in the yard. He's never happier than when he's playing hide'n'seek in your summerhouse or climbing up on your iron deer — Right in here, Titus. George, Clem — " she rose to direct two of her Negro men coming down the stair with large, dusty pasteboard boxes, "— put those in the *back* parlor — and close the door, to keep the dust out of — Oh, *here's* Mo-other's angel!" Against her cream coat she took the slightly soiled five-year-old handed like a parcel by Melissa. "Say 'Hello, there, Cousin Milly'!"

"Hel-lo, there, Cou-sin, Mil-ly!" He spoke distinctly (his mother having no use for "baby-talk"), greeted Cou-sin Net-tie the same way. A beautiful child, he was too well behaved, too subdued and too well-cared-for to be an attractive one. He had "come" long after everyone had been sure Carietta would never bear a living child.

"Why — he's beginning to look like my Launcelot!"

"Oh, *no!* I mean — do you really think so?" Miss Carietta retrieved

herself. "If he grows up to be even half as good-looking as Lance, I'll — where *is* Lance this morning?"

"Up on the North Fork — with Gamaliel, his 'tutor.'" Miss Milly smiled indulgently at her title for the stupid Negro body-servant everyone else called "Gum." "Put me down as a doting mother, if you will, but that boy of mine'll be another Audubon or — or Thoreau. One day Sironia'll be as proud of him as — as his mother — and father are already."

"Oh, I'm sure we *all* will," Nettie got in ahead of Miss Carietta. "Just last night I was telling that wild Indian of a Jed Hadyn he ought to be more like his Cousin Lance — Launcelot."

"Now, now!" Miss Milly put a deprecatory, but pleased hand on Nettie's fat hip, "Jed's all right as he is — no matter what people — "

"Oh, Cousin Milly, I know what you mean! People don't blame *me* for — all he does, do they?"

"Certainly not, Nettie. Carietta and I both think you are a godsend to these precious," she hugged Nelia, whose mouth was full of Thaxton beads, "— motherless waifs."

"No, no one could blame you, Cousin Nettie." Carietta saw the need for an expert hand, her own. "When the wild 'Reardon streak' crops out, it's just like it is with — royalty. There's just nothing poor *mortals* can do."

"Carietta, I hope that doesn't get around. It sounds so — so — "

"Miz Milly, dey's ready ter start puttin' down de canvas. Whut rume you wanter fix fust?"

"The library, I think. Yes, that'll do nicely."

"But, dear, don't you think it would be better," Miss Carietta always *asked* others' opinions, never understood when they didn't like her disregarding them entirely, "— better to lay the canvas first in the first room we finish decorating? It will save dirtying it — "

"There won't be much dirtying — dear."

"But, darling, there *is*. One can't help it. I do so want everything to be exactly right. Do let me have my way just this *once*, lovie!"

"Just this once?" Miss Milly mumbled to herself with some emphasis. "Why, certainly, Carietta. How could anyone deny *you* anything?" How, indeed?

"Oh, thank you. I know you'll not regret it. Fred, have two of my niggras bring in those potted palms the florist is just delivering. I'll show you where they go. Last year they were over there and didn't do *at all*."

Miss Milly clenched her hands behind her. Carietta was *really* helping. But there was something to be thankful for: that fat and loathsome, if still pretty Selma Thurston (her married name of Rogan was seldom in Miss Milly's thoughts) hadn't shown up unasked to help decorate — *after* all the work was done. Someday, she, Milli-

cent Letitia Thaxton Thaxton, was going to "assert herself." She'd strike the Rogans from her "list," no matter how much easygoing Calvin insisted that after all Selma *was* a cousin of both of them (and of Carietta, as well).

"Is dis heah rume all right, Miz Ca'ietta?" The back parlor was opened some minutes later to show Titus and six other Negroes gleaming with sweat and accomplishment. Windows were completely hung with smilax. And in the smilax (Miss Milly felt Nelia sliding from her lap, absently grabbed the little bundle just in time) neatly entwined were just the right amount of tissue-paper roses—

"Why, what's the matter, Millicent?"

"The roses! I *told* you I was using the *pink* ones this year, Carietta."

"Oh—di-id you? You said you—*believed* you'd have the pink. But the yellow ones are so much—er—fresher looking. Don't you see, darling?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh, Milly!" Spaniel-brown eyes were dimmed. Plumpish madonna lily sank into her own chair to support her back. "I—I only wanted everything nice. And now you're angry—with me. I'll have it all un-done and fixed over—if you say so. Just say the word and—Oh, my spine!"

"It doesn't matter. We'll use the yellow ones."

"Well, if you're sure you want them, sweet. You'll like them *even* better when you—get some rest, are more—at yourself."

Miss Milly's small nose thinned, as did the small mouth. She had learned to say as little as possible at times like this. The Lord knew there was enough to be done and little enough time without hurting the feelings of Carietta and then having to console her for hours.

Expertly selecting the right key from the jangling bunch on her belt chain, Miss Milly concentrated on unlocking sideboard, china closet and cupboard to bring out silver, china and party napkins. By counting them doggedly (the count never came out twice the same. No need for it too, really), she could almost forget there was such a person as Cousin Carietta.

Some system showed in the work—it had been done often enough, goodness knew. All the preparations were, inexplicably, completed. By two, everything was ready.

Milly had the house darkened. The lights would go on a little later. A little more slowly than was necessary she was pulling *herself* up the curving stair rail when halted just around the bend. Someone on the porch was rattling the doorknob without ringing. Weakly, as she had once seen Eleanora Duse do it, she sank to the stairs while Mammy Henderson waddled to the front door. Now came that gushy, staccato, "Here I am to help, Mammy! Better late than never, Oscar

says! Couldn't get here a minute sooner — really ought not've come at all, with all I have to do — but I couldn't fail my dear cousin — Oh, *my*, no! I'll just get my reticule from the carriage and be right back."

"De doctuh, he say Miz Milly is *bad* off, Miz Selma, not to let *no*body in till recepshun time — "

"Oh, how perfectly awful! I must run up and sit with her." She knew Mammy was lying, tried to push on in until she saw a flat, slippered foot firmly braced against the door. Milly could only murmur fervently, "I thank Thee, Lord God of Hosts, for Mammy Henderson!"

Lance Thaxton accompanied, rather, attended, by the overgrown good-natured Gum, had left Thaxton Hill the back way directly after his early breakfast. It was his mother's suggestion, but no one else would have dared say it was to get him out of her way for the decorating. There had been so much argument about who was to have the privilege of fixing the boys' lunch for almost daily fishing trips when the weather allowed them, Miss Milly had made Old Poppy and Mammy Henderson's Black Josie take turns. Today had been Josie's. Black face hadn't even tried to hide her complete satisfaction with the results. Only fifteen, her height and Lance's childlike eyes made her look the older instead of four years younger.

"Now, Launcelot," Miss Milly had run a last practiced look over his clean denims and blue work shirt and spoken to him, although it was really Gum who would have to remember, "you go straight down Palladium Avenue to River Road, then turn north to Niggertown Bridge. On the other side of the River, cut across our place to North Fork. Remember now," she forgot an instant and spoke to Poppy's black Gum directly, "to get to Mister Jed's side, you'll have to cross by *ford*. Whatever you do, don't fish there! Go on up to Minnow Pool. And Gum, see that Mister Lance doesn't sit on the damp ground or — "

"Y'as'm — no'm!" put in at intervals.

"And if your Cousin Jed rides by, Launcelot, be sure to thank him for letting you fish on his side of Minnow Pool. Tell him if he doesn't behave himself he'll hear from me!" Gum couldn't tell whether this last was all joking or just half: for certain, Marse Jed wuz sho spreadin' hisse'f!

To anyone but Gum, Miss Milly's repeated instructions would have been pathetic. To him they were something to be obeyed to the letter — unless they could be disobeyed with no chance of her finding out.

It was a fine day. Sun was softer and more golden for the recent rain, and bare tree limbs stretched high toward washed blue of sky. Wet earth exhaled misted winter smells, as their tread disturbed it. Gum had their lunch in the crook of one arm, tackle and a can of worms under the other. He had to take three shuffling steps to Mister Lance's swinging two.

"Whut you reckon we goner ketch tuhday?"

"I — I don't know, Gum. What *you* reckon?"

"Waal — fust I ketch me a minner. Denn I put 'im on mah hook an' ketch me a sun-perch — 'bout so long." Two black forefingers were held five inches apart, then after frowning consideration parted an additional inch. "Denn — I puts *him* on mah hook an' — "

"Gum!" Lane was fascinated. "You *know* you can't do — "

"Oh, yis, I kin, Marse Lance." Gum knew what to do with an appreciative audience. "'I swars t'God I kin. I done it *lots* o' times — "

"Where at — ?"

"Waal — sometimes heah, sometimes theah. Like dis." He went through the motions of slipping a hook through the middle-back of a small fish. "Gee-my-netty!" He shook a finger to show it had been finned painfully and was stinging like all get-out.

"Den I swings 'im back in — like dis." He almost lost the lunch bundle. "An' in he go widout hardly no splash 'tall. De little ripple-es o' water spreads out an' out, an' mo' comes aftuh 'em ontil dey's ripples miles an' miles out in de ocean. An' whinn dem ripple-es gits to — to dat China country — "

"Stop, Gum. You'll have me busting out laughing at the supper table again — just remembering!" This was true, for when hours after hearing a joke it came back to him, he got twice as much from it as most people, that is, when he remembered. These fishing trips were the happiest parts of life. *White* boys like Jed Hadyn and his other cousins and their friends made fun of him — when his mother wasn't around.

By now Gum's imagination had landed a whale whose head was tied to the big pecan tree near the forbidden Ford Hole. His mile-wide tail was knocking Mister Jed's "cue-per-low room" off'n de top o' Hadyn Hill.

Lance, laughing so much he couldn't walk straight, gave up and plopped limply to wet ground. "You *gotter* stop, Gum, or I'll die!"

"All right, Marse Lance, all right." Gum was beaming. "Ah'll try to stop if you'll get up off'n dat wet ground. Come on 'long now — "

With occasional outbreaks of sniggering, they crossed rattly old Niggertown Bridge, stopping midway to look down at the River's slow-moving brown water. Up three or more feet with the rain, it was going down some now, to judge by speckled, frothy drift out in the middle.

"It's prettier this way, Gum. I mean—" Lance had lost what he'd meant to say.

"Sho' is!" Gum was fine, agreed about everything, never reminded him to hold his shoulders straight, or remember who he was or that he'd have to take charge of Thaxton Hill, the Bank and the farms some day.

"Whar at's we goner fish tuhday?" Negro grin released the words slyly. It was a kind of game. Marse Lance sho did like games. "Not de Ford Hole—*sholy!*"

Little-boy mischief in Lance's smile was not easy to hide. "Well," very slowly, "I've been thinking and I decided we better fish in the—Ford Hole *this* time."

"Laws-ee, Marse Lance!" It was always the same, but always as if this were the first time and the onliest way anybody had ever thought of disobeying Miss Milly point-blank.

He set down their lunch, and scrambled up a slope of limestone and scraggly dead grass on the Thaxton side of North Fork. Into a sickly clump of red sumac went a black arm and out it came with two thin, much used bamboo poles about ten feet long, their tackle wrapped around them. He picked up his former load, and they sloshed on happily in grayish mud. Neither thought of Lance doing any of the carrying.

Denim pants were soon mostly drab-white, gray dirt splotches, shoes like wads of mud. The ford was a slab of slimy limestone over which the water rippled a thin, shining film. Crossing the twenty feet or more took most of the mud off their shoes. The west bank was mostly limestone too, shelving up easy from the water. Already the sun had dried things out good. The "Ford Hole," long ago formed by this upcropping limestone slab, was an irregular hundred yards long, ten wide and "real deep" just a few feet out from the bank. It had caused three drownings—in the last twenty years. Twenty years was a short time in Sironia.

Upstream only a quarter-mile, the Minnow Hole began. Just as large with just as many fish, and not over five feet deep anyplace, it wasn't at all "dangerous."

Miss Milly knew that whenever midafternoon sun warmed things up "the least bit," Lance and Gum were sure to go swimming, no matter how cold the water was. She could always tell by dark brown hair tightly curling when they had. That was why she was so particular. Always she got in as they were leaving home. "You're a beautiful swimmer, Launcelot, but you know how you—get to thinking!" (Supposing she really knew how de leastest little thing got him "all flustered," threw him off in his breathing, made him mix together parts of all the arm and leg strokes his pappy had taken so many Sunday afternoons to teach him. He'd get a nervous cramp and start

gasping for breath, swallowing and fighting the water. Then he'd go down, and Gum'd have to pull him out. Just supposing Miss Milly knew how *many* times Gum had had to! Or about them trotlines in de Ford Hole!)

While Gum was putting the lunch in a limestone crevice, Lance stood at the edge of Ford Hole, long gray-stained trouser legs wide apart, hands in pockets, listening for that mockingbird. He always came — the *same* one, Lance just knew — when he recognized him. People who saw Lance thought, if he didn't wear his hair so long, if his mother didn't dress him so old-fashioned, he'd look like other boys. But he wouldn't have.

Eagerly he turned at long, grieving bird-note. Wonder if, like had been handed down by the niggers, "de mockin'-buhd was sent tuh tell menfolks hit ain't no use *trying* tuh be happy in *dis* world. Whinn you thinks you is, you ain't foolin' nobody but yo'se'f." That wasn't true. Nobody could be happier than he was — right now!

" 'Bout ready for a little fishin'?" and when the other did not take his eyes from the bird silhouetted against the heights, Gum suggested idly, "S'pose you fishes whar you is an' I'll fish whar *I* is." He baited a hook and handed the pole to Lance. His own, baited, Gum threw out so deftly that it seemed to melt into the still surface of the deepest part, only five feet out. The green and red cork settled with hardly a ripple. Then he lay back on clean powdery rock already sun-warmed, drew up one patched denim knee and flopped the other over it. The butt of his own pole was shoved into his crotch, the pole resting on his top knee. Lazily he watched Marse Lance. Not much chance of even getting a bite this time of year, but that didn't make no difference to *him!* He'd just as soon fish where they wasn't no fish as where they was. As for Gum, this was a whole lot better than having to work hisself to death, which he near 'bout did if he stayed in seeing-distance of Miss Milly. Far as he was concerned, it was "Stay whar you is, li'l fishes — don' you pester me, an' I won't pester you!" Sleeping halfway-like in the sun like this was sho' good. Black, wool-matted head settled back, its face mostly a lazy, seraphic beam.

"What you thinking about, Gum?"

Massive young body writhed lazily. "Jus' rekkermemberin' how dat Lilybeth — ahum! — I means nothin' 'tall, Marse Lance. Jes' ketchin' up on mah sleep. How many bites you had?"

"Not many — not any, I mean. Gu-um, why'd you start to tell me about Lilybeth and then — stop?"

"Now, Marse Lance, you knows *good*'n'well yo' maw don't want you botherin' yo' haid bout no sech. An', futhermo', I ain't de one to tell yuh." This last was spoken as something he wanted to be able to say he'd said. "Miss Milly'd skin me uhlive — sho'!"

"Mo-other likes for us to go fishing."

"Dis's diff'unt. Gum's heah to look aftuh yuh — an' proud to do hit. Whut I means — you remembuhs whin she heared 'bout Lilybeth's Jared bein' bawned half white she lef' de table."

The large, dark eyes filled with tears. "I ought to remember, I guess, but I hardly ever can. I like to remember. It makes Mo-other smile. Sometimes I remember, but — How come Leah and — and Jared are half white? I was wondering about that — at least, I think I — "

"Now, Marse Lance. You hear-ed Miz Milly tell Poppy to tell her no-'count boy — dat's me — to keep his big mouf shut 'bout sech as dat. She say yo' pappy's de one to tell yuh. Please, suh, you ax *him* an'," reluctantly, "leave po' Gum to his sweet res'!"

"I did ask — Fa-ather. It was about a dream I remembered plain — then. He started to explain — but his throat got to hurting him. He said he'd finish telling me some other time — but I don't think he ever did. Last night at supper I just barely mentioned what happens every time I dream about women without any clothes on, and he began talking about my stamp collection. Mo-other left the room crying, and Father *started* to say something but his throat got to hurting him again. He stopped just like you did, a minute ago. Jed did, too, when I asked *him*. Looks like nobody wants to tell me anything — except Lilybeth — "

"Huh? Dat nigger ain't tried to *do* nothin' wid yuh, is she?"

"Do *what?* Early this morning I met her on my walk down River Road and she sort of slowed down. I stopped and she asked didn't I ever get cur'ous. I asked her what about and — "

"An' she say if you bring her a silvuh dollah down back o' de trash-dumpin' ground tonight 'bout nine she'll show you whut er-bout!"

"She *told* you!"

"Didn't hafter! Down behindst de trash dump, dat's Lilybeth's bizness *add*ress. And a dollah's whut she charges white men." Gum laughed before he realized how disrespectful it had sounded. "Us nigguh boys is on her free-lis'. Whut'd you say — denn, Marse Lance?"

This part Lance had no trouble remembering. He had told Lilybeth he didn't ever have any money, didn't ever need any. She'd fla'nted her pink skirt at him and walked away fast, like she'd been wasting her time — real impudent. He had meant to ask Father for a dollar at dinnertime, was sure he'd want to know what Lilybeth had to tell as much as Lance did — but Father'd said right off: "This is one of your mother's upset days — say as little as possible." Mother was all wrought up, something about the Elliotts. When she'd calmed down, Lance had forgotten what it was he'd meant to ask for.

"Thank de Lawd fer dat! Lilybeth ain't mean. She didn't aim to

be imperdent. But — soonuh or latuh she tell ever'thing she know. If you *was* to — give her dat dollah, whut you done'd git back to Miz Milly sho'. An' whin it did — oo-ee!"

"What'd get back?"

"Lawd God! Axin' dat — and jis look at yo'se'f!" Gum's glance flicked significantly up from Lance's feet and back down, made Lance innocently conscious of his body. " 'Pears to me de time is come fer *some*body ter tell you things, whether yo' maw say so or not! And if nobody else will — Marse Lance, you evuh hear tell o' — stone-ache?"

" 'Course not — rocks can't ache!"

"Listen heah, boy!"

Red and green corks floated downstream and back against the limestone bank, tugged unnoticed at their lines and poles flat on the bank. Gum's softly mouthed syllables slid one into the other, might have been incomprehensible to some. What they lacked was made up for by graphic hand gestures anybody could understand. (Like Miss Carietta was all the time saying: "Seems to me Launcelot can take in what he *wants* to well enough — and ignore completely what he doesn't. How I envy him!") It was no effort at all — seemed natural — to understand all the picturesque gesturing, every fact Gum was expounding. He talked and they ate lunch and he never stopped.

The first either knew of the man, for some minutes concealed by autumn-flaming sumac, was the scrape of heavy shoes on chalky rock. Gum was lifted by scruff and denim pants' belt and heaved 'way out into Ford's Hole — out in the deepest part.

"Oh, hello, Cousin Jed! Mother send you? Gum and I — we just got — to talking — "

"So I *heard!*" Jed was pulling off the coat of his blue serge suit like he was mad about something and yelling at Gum, "Trifling, no-'count, black — pimp!"

"What's a pimp?"

"Oh, shut up, Lance!" And to Gum, threshing around — *funny* — in the water, "Cut out that foolishness and swim on over here!" Jed was breaking off a six-foot sumac branch, stripping it of its red leaves. "I can't tell Cousin Milly what you were telling Mister Lance, but I can sure as hell see you don't again. Gum, stop pretending. That won't help you a — What the hell!" The sumac branch fell to the rock as a contorted, unrecognizable black face sank below arm-churned water. Ragged blue legs rolled up in sight, tangled tight in wire and imbedded fishhooks, wire binding every which way. Arms and legs were all trussed together like a — like —

There was another big splash. Cousin Jed had dived in. A black face shot to the surface. Jed must be under him, buoying him up so he could breathe. Lance jumped to his feet. "Gum, what's the matter,

Gum?" White eyeballs were walled-back. Instead of helping Jed get a hold to bring him in to shore Gum was fighting like—like that mad dog Father had trapped in a minnow net. He was trying to hit and kick, getting himself more tangled up every move in one of the old trotlines most always stretched just below the muddy surface of Ford Hole.

Uncertainly Lance started wading out to them.

"No, Lance! Go *back!*"

He wanted to help. Must be *some* way. If only all the "ways" there were would quit jumbling together, moving his hands and feet every which way! Crying a little, he was running down the bank and then up again. He saw his hands wringing each other, didn't know how to stop them. Then he tripped over Jed's sumac branch. By the time he'd snatched it up, the others had disappeared—gone down, both of them, *away* down—

A splashing upheaval showed long, water-plastered hair down white forehead—but Gum? Gum was gone. He was down there all tangled up in wires, to stay. "Jed, come on out!" Jed didn't seem to hear him even, but arched up like—like some fish Lance had seen a picture of and dived down again. It seemed he was never coming up. He must have dived all the way to the bottom. He might be caught down there, too. Then the choppy surface was broken again. Water was sloshed all around from their fight with each other. No, it was Gum doing the fighting—like he was crazy. Jed was trying to stop him. A white fist flashed up out of the water and just missed a wide black jaw. Enormous white teeth closed in the flesh of Jed's shoulder—clamped tight. Down they both went again under brownish-green water suddenly pinkish. They rolled over and up. The trotline wires and hooks could be seen cutting into Gum's clothes and skin. Jed was trying to keep them both afloat and tear the hooks loose at the same time. He couldn't do it—they'd both go down again and then—"Let go. *Please*, let go, Jed!" Only Jed wouldn't let go, not ever. Lance knew he'd rather die with the nigger he was trying to save than turn aloose and live, himself. *Any* Hadyn or Thaxton or Storrow would! Lance wasn't sure of much, but he was of that. He knew he should be ashamed for telling Jed to let Gum drown. Jed would use up what strength he had left and they'd both die. Lance ought to go in, too, before—"Get back, Lance!" Tears streaked down his face in helplessness. He couldn't get them out, and Jed wouldn't let him come in with them.

They weren't quite so far out from the bank as they had been. Working his body like a snake's, Jed was inching along with both faces just above the water. Each wiggling jerk was a little weaker than the one before it. Gum's struggles against him were weakening,

too. Keeping both afloat with his legs and one arm, with the other Jed was trying to choke Gum's jaws loose but there wasn't enough strength left — look! A white thumb was gouging one of those white-balled eyes from its black socket. Great teeth loosened to snap at the thumb, just barely missed.

"Lance! That branch!" Jed's head went under.

What had that meant — what could Jed do with the branch? But if Jed wanted it — Lance waded out into the water. He extended the branch toward Jed, but it went in the opposite direction. He tried again. This time Jed's teeth open and closed — on its small end. Just like a fish! "Pull, Lance!" It was just barely understandable. Lance backed slowly up the shelving white above water line. When playing a big fish you mustn't jerk, might break your line. Both were moving with him. Which movements were helping and which weren't? Lance couldn't tell. Then the branch broke.

In his excitement, Lance jumped in the shallow water, got hands under Jed's armpits. Now he was dragging Jed, dragging both, for bare white arm was bent under black chin, a white hand gripping a lolling red tongue.

Lance didn't remember getting them up on the bank. But there they were. Like two sacks of wet rags they lay, water and slimy vomit dribbling out of unconscious mouths.

Lance didn't know what to do. He'd worked on tangled trotlines a lot. When you can't untangle 'em, cut 'em! Gum's rusted pliers were with the tackle. In Lance's hands they began snipping wire that ceased to bite into black throat. Slowly freed was a pop-eyed monster, who slowly began to resemble — Gum. At the last snip, Lance himself felt all the rock and sky and water about him melt together in a greenish haze, like it did when things went wrong while he was swimming just before Gum pulled him out.

The next thing Lance saw was a huge, half-clothed black tending Jed's gnawed shoulder, cleaning it and mewling like a baby.

"Mistuh Jed, why *didn'* you jes' lemme drown! I thanks yuh, but I'd a heap ruther be daid than act de fool like I done! Mistuh Jed, I ain't nevuh lost my haid thatterway befo'. Could'a' drownded you!"

"Shut up, Gum." Weakly Jed pushed himself up, had to grab his knees to stay up. "I'm trying to think."

For a long time there wasn't any sound, except mockingbird talk. Then Jed leaned over to search Lance's face, spoke to Gum. "He'll be all right. When I overheard what you were fixing up for him, I was the one lost my head. But you're right. Mister Lance is a man now — one way, anyhow. *Something's* got to be done before he gets in serious trouble with it. It's his right, I think, like it is any man's. Understand?"

"You jus' tell me *what* you wants me to do an' I'll do hit, Marse Jed."

"All right! Do what I heard you planning to do. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, suh! An' I'se proud you uh-grees. I was 'bout to 'pologize fer dat, too!"

"Forget it!" Jed tilted sideways to shake Lance's arm, "Lance! It's almost dark! Better hurry or Cousin Milly'll give all *three* of us a 'whuppin'!"

Lance got up. He must be awake, but he didn't feel like it.

"Mistuh Jed, mah folks's sho' goner be proud whin dey hears who my wuthless life was saved *by!*"

Jed stopped helping Gum pack up. "No! Lance'll forget — if he hasn't already! And if *you* tell one living soul, nigger I'll — Remember what I told you I'd do if you ever stole out one of my horses *again*, don't you?"

"Hyah! Hyah! Hyah! Marse Jed, you oughter be 'shamed!"

Bill Elliott experienced his first feeling of relief the whole damn morning. Through plate glass, between the Bank's Doric columns on the Aurelia Street side he could make out the top of Calvin's head. He was sitting at his mahogany desk of as many pigeonholes and little drawers as Marshall's, right where Bill wanted him to be. Usually he rapped on the glass for Calvin to motion him to come back later if he was busy. This morning he had to see Calvin whether he was busy or wasn't. He hardened his muscles and opened the mahogany door with "Private Entrance" set in its stained glass.

"Hello, Bill. Glad to see you!"

Well, maybe, he was, at that. But would he be when he found out why he'd come?

"I'm not going to stay but a minute, Calvin — "

"That's time enough to — sit down!"

"Hell! I don't know whether I'm standing or sitting today."

"Better find out before you cross your legs!" The laughter of both could hardly have been more friendly or less amused.

Bill started to lay his brown derby hat on top of the golden-oak desk, then decided to hold it over the uneasiness of great freckled hands. He sat on deeply tufted black leather. His heavy brogans felt as if sinking deep into the pile of Axminister blue and brown scroll-work. The big coal stove, all iron and fancy isinglass in the corner, had the office too hot. That did not fully account for Bill's feeling that the numerous bronze cherubs — or half-cherubs — which sup-

ported the very fancy painted metal ceiling on their raised arms were about to let it fall—on *him*. Sweat popped out on thickly freckled, wide face. Rusty red of "muttonchops" grew darker with sweat. "That little deal of ours over Chalcedonia way will net you and Marshall and me a thousand or better—each."

"That much?"

"And the best thing about it is that the School Board knows we gave them as good material and at *lower* cost than anybody else offered."

"That ought to help with the others. Never heard of such a wave of school-building. Education must be a good thing, Bill."

"It's a good thing for *us*."

"You do all the work—ought to get a larger share—"

"For drinking champagne with moth-eaten old school-board bastards—on the money you two put up? But that ain't *why* I'm here." He met the other's eyes, flushed an ugly red. Hurriedly he drew from his brown plaid vest two long, thick cigars and handed Calvin one. The other had its end clipped by the cutter swung on watch chain across his own vest. It was stuck in his mouth while he hoisted one side of tight brown trousers seat so that he could scratch a match thereon with one sweep. He held the flame to Calvin's cigar until little sucking breaths had been followed by a low whoosh of light gray smoke, then lighted his own. With a gesture almost of daintiness he shook the match until it went out, and dropped it hissing into the handsome foot-tall brass cuspidor between them. His first great puff rose above the office partition, chiefly wreaths of stained-glass laurel leaded into diamond-shape panels of ground glass.

"You look like Hazel, Calvin—when she's suspecting me of something."

"I seem to recall putting you out on a bridge nowhere near your home—at your own request."

"There you go! Maybe, I just dropped in this morning to tell you again it was *damn* fine of you to manage that about your wife's party. I hope she wasn't too—too—"

"Don't be a fool, Bill. Mrs. Thaxton's *delighted* to have any friends of mine. She would have had Hazel and yourself long before this, but didn't think you'd enjoy it—which *you* damn well won't! But neither'll *I*." He laughed more with handsome black brows above magnificent nose than with sound. "You've no idea the feeling of relief that suffuses—creeps all over me every year when the last guest has said the same thing and cleared out. Just about the only pleasure I expect to get out of this year's—er—performance is watching your face trying to rise like a harvest moon out of a hard-boiled shirt. It's going to make *my* evening a success."

"You're welcome — damn you!" Bill smiled ashamedly at what was an unmistakably true forecast. "You just oughter see all the fancy harness Hazel's ordered for me. Don't remember a meal at home in three weeks I didn't sit on a needle, find thread or sewing scraps on my coat or get braid mixed in the gravy. That Mrs. Timkins can do more gossiping and less sewing than any other *three* you could name. Claims she's 'nervious.' Comes twice a year and by the time she leaves she has Hazel at outs with everybody in town until time to come again. Makes *me* 'nervious.' But *I'm* not mad at anybody today, not even Mrs. Timkins."

"Milly used to have her. Way back somewhere, she comes of a good family. Like Cousin Selma, she lets no one forget it. But she said some very unkind things — or somebody said she said them about Laun- — about a member of our family. Nothing could be less important, but you know how that would affect *any* mother." The same old stony look had come over aquiline features: Calvin would never show the suffering his son's affliction had caused him, would cause him so long as he lived. "The bright side, of course, Bill, is that all sewing women eventually get through, and move on."

"Not bright *enough!* I've been trying to talk Marshall into putting in really good ready-made dresses, not just low-priced ones. He says if Lipscomb's would stock the kind of dresses women like your wife and mine would buy, every woman in town would try them *all* on, and then none of them would have one of the things, because every other woman in town would say she had had it on and wouldn't be caught dead in it. Marshall knows women."

"And *you?*"

"That's deliberately hitting *below* the — "

"Mister Calvin, sir, the Directors' Meeting is in fifteen minutes. Some of them are already here, and there's no place for — "

"Thank you, my boy." And as the partition door closed, "don't hurry, some of them are sure to be late — all *sit* too much, anyhow."

"I'll say what I came to say and get out. You've heard — everybody hears everything in this town — the talk about me being — having a — bastard child?"

"Yes." He put out a hand toward Bill's nearest forearm, but did not touch it.

Bill looked up gratefully. There were tears in his light, tiger-like eyes. "I'm just a tramp, Calvin — and always will be. Nobody's — *after* me. But that doesn't keep me from feeling some — some — responsibility — "

"Few men do under those circumstances. It's to your *credit*. What you want *me* to do?"

"I want you to keep this," he blurted as he drew an untidy roll of

bills from plaid coat pocket. "Put it in some kind of fund to give my — to give the kid a chance — handle whatever way *you* think best."

"All right. We can decide on the details when we have more time. No help is needed *now*, I don't think. Who — who *else* is to know?"

"*No* one!" Thick, good-natured lips twisted sarcastically. "I'm protecting myself to the bitter end. It's all in cash. My check stub says only 'Incidentals.' Hazel must never be — embarrassed by it." He talked on, hastily sketching in certain details which might be useful in case something unforeseen came up. "What're you putting —" he pointed at the small red leather memo book in which Calvin was giving a good imitation of Miss Milly, "— in that?"

"Just enough to jog my memory — nobody else's! See —" He let Bill read the brief notes, adding a birth date as he did so. "Now, Bill!"

Without any preliminary the other had bowed over as if cramped. Half supported by the heavy roll-top desk his compact body was shaking it.

"Don't, Bill, don't! It's nothing that hasn't happened to —"

"It's *not that*, Calvin. It's — *you* can't know how much Hazel and me wanted a kid — what it did to both of us when we found out we couldn't ever. It's the *worst* thing can happen to any married couple!"

"No, Bill, no. It's *not* the — worst thing —"

This bath of Marshall's had been enjoyed by no one except Tam.

Moira stood a moment in the back door after emptying the tub, watching soapy water drain down the graveled ditch she had dug into a Reardon Street gutter. Must be getting colder, the way the lamplight from behind her dark red dress showed warm water steaming. What did it mean, foretell? Irish Moira felt things that *weren't*. Sometimes she felt them more than some that were. This mist fading up into night's blackness could be a reminder that the troubles people get so powerful wrought up about, only hours later don't seem nearly so bad — not really so bad as some *new* trouble. Darkness, itself, was the never long dispelled gloom that was woman's. Sure and the golden lamplight from behind shamed her with the joy-part of her life, her boy — and (with all he wasn't to her) her husband.

Such as that must wait. Tam was not in bed as he should be. He was tugging at one of his father's pants legs. The new black-and-tan puppy was gnawing on one of his.

"Moira, ask the little people you're visiting with to excuse you. Then shut that door and," Marshall gently disengaged again two fat,

and slightly greasy, little fists from newly pressed black broadcloth "—get this pesky varmint off me." He stooped low. Tender kiss on both little fists showed better what he meant by "varmint."

"Oh, Tammy, Tammy!" Moira closed the door on dreaming, and swept him up in her arms, "when *will* you be learning not to mess up your *fine* father? It's a gentleman *he* is. Ye're his only chee-ild, but that gives ye no right now to be *touching* his fine self. That's ree-served for his blue-blooded friends—like Bill Elliott!"

"Where's my muffler? Never mind, I see it. Moira, why must you fill the boy's head with your own—er—grudges? He'll have enough of his own in time without—"

"Is that a fact now?" She was halted by indecision, whether to use this as launching point for another of quick-starting rages like sky-rockets, and almost as quickly burnt out, or to ignore it. That would concern *him* just as much—meaning not at all. "So Mister Elliott's been made a gentleman now by one invitation? He is one way all right—treating a wife far too good for him something shameful, even if she don't know—!"

"Moira! I won't have my son hearing—"

"So-o—Tammy's *your* son now! So-o I'm not to mention what everybody in town knows?"

"No!"

"Just as *you* say!" She began clearing the table with quick, furious movements. "Ye'll not be hearing another word out of me about Bill Elliott's bastard or any other in—"

"Bas*tid?*"

"Me dar-r-rling!" The plate she was drying splashed in the dishpan. She stooped over to hold him tight. "Sure and it's a wicked woman ye mother is—with a mean, wicked tongue in her—"

"That'll do, Moira. You're talking *very* Irish this evening, it seems. What time is it?"

"If ye can turn ye bewitchin' face away from that mirror a second, the clock might be telling ye—nineteen past eight!"

"I'll be in time then."

"In time? Ye'll be the first to ar-r-rive and the last to—"

"And how'd ye be knowing that," he imitated her intentional and heavy lapse into ould sod Irish, "—mavourneen?"

"Never you mind. I know, all right enough. What—excuse ye giving *this* year—for me?"

"Excuse?" He looked at her benignly with the smile that made her hate him and love him in almost unbearable intensity, a smile both condescending and teasing. "I'll say my wife won't trust anybody else to look after Tam, who has a—toe-ache that might develop into double pneu—"

"Why don't you tell the truth—just *once*. Say your wife's not fit to—"

"Only because it's not the—*whole* truth. You've said yourself you wouldn't be on Thaxton Hill an hour before Nanette Lane would find some way to remind as many as possible that Miss Sylvia's former 'personal maid' was now a guest—"

"It's for Tammy. It's got to be forgotten—by the time he grows up—"

"In Sironia? My dear, it won't be—and why need it be? Things like that, forgotten or not, don't *matter* any more—except with a very few—and those few don't matter so much any more, themselves."

"With *some*, they do! Are ye suggesting now that I do go with ye? I can take care of myself. When Nanette Lane starts in, I can give her as good as she sends. She needs to be told Jed Hadyn's no idea of marrying her Laurine. All he's after is—"

"Moira," quietly. "*That's* why we can't risk it! You don't stay mad a minute, but while you *are* you could do or say things that would make Tam's way a lot harder socially than it'll already be." Black broadcloth evening cape, used only for one event each year, flared as he swung into it. High hat thumped up into shape from an outward twist of both hands on its brim. "And so—good night, Tam. Good night, my beloved." Not a cruel man, there were times when he had to seem so.

As he strode through the silvered chill of five blocks to Thaxton Hill, he pictured Moira as slamming china about in the sink. (In 1881, she had broken $3.78 worth at store cost.)

By the time he reached Jeff Davis Street, the party lights could be seen plainly through waving crape-myrtle branches. For these next few minutes there was in him again much of the young Marshall Lipscomb of high hopes calling on Millicent Letitia Thaxton. (All imagination, it was no more at variance with fact than his idea of what Moira was doing.)

"I've *got* to go in, Claude—to dress."

"You needn't get so doggone anxious, Laurine. Be like me. I don't *mind* being one of the common herd!" Large, about-to-be fat Claude Bannion stared sullenly at the reins in scarred, butcher's fingers. It was a long half-hour they had been sitting in his buggy in front of the Lane home. "You got plenty of time. Not dark yet."

"How do *you* know how much time it takes a girl to dress?" That turned him redder even. "Now, I've really got to—"

"Wait—just a minute, Laurine. You know I can't ever say all I

mean. What I — when my dad was my age he'd been married three years and I was walking!"

"Times have changed — " she began confidently, but it faded out. She was already nineteen. There really wasn't any good reason why she shouldn't marry this son of the town's most successful butcher. Soon he'd be a partner in the business. He had quit school in the tenth grade to take over the cattle-buying. Now he managed all but the fancy-cut butchering. Only eighteen, he was already "established." He had the best *business* prospects of any boy she knew. He would be good to her. She would never have to worry about anything — in a money way. Good enough looking in a dull, horselike way, he was neat in his conservative gray suits (all of which looked alike). But she'd just die married to Claude. Then there was that reason no nice girl would mention: Claude sweated with no exertion at all and always before a date was finished there was that pervading barn-y mustiness which with her eyes shut had come more than anything else to stand for — Claude. It was not particularly offensive, but like Claude, himself, it was so — so unexciting. It was the kind of objection a girl holds on to when she's got to have one and there isn't any other. "Claude, I mean it. I'm going in right this — "

"*I* love you, Laurine. *They* don't care if *you* come to their old party or not. And no matter what he *tells* you, Jed Hadyn ain't thinking about but just *one* thing — "

"Claude Bannion! Of all the mean — contemptible — disgusting things to say! You're nothing but a big, fat *slob* — I didn't mean that, Claude." She would have taken his hand if they had not been in plain view of the neighbors. Her mother, too, almost certainly was watching from behind the parlor's lace curtains. She leaned a little closer, saw the pleasure it gave him, felt her nose flare at the well-known scent. "No, they *don't* care, only invited me on account of Father — and Mother. But it's the only big party I'll get to this winter, I expect. All my life I've wanted to go to one of Miss Milly's 'Last Fridays.' Mother says there's nothing to them, but — poor Mother, she's so — so — Besides, I couldn't very well — er — decline — if I wanted to. You know that, Claude."

"And *besides* your mother is after you to snag Jed, no matter *how* you do it. Fine chance *you* got with — "

"That settles it!" Rising, she had to sit back down to avoid Claude who leaned over to tuck in more firmly the slipping laprobe of tigerish black and yellow plush. "I've never been so insulted in all — "

"Say you haven't? Just you give Jed Hadyn time!"

"Bother Jed Hadyn! I've never had a date with him in my life — probably won't ever have another one."

"Pretending you don't know your mother kept on hinting until

Miss Milly had to put your card in his invitation or refuse outright?"

"That's—" Big, dark-blue eyes shone with tears, and natural color surged to her cheeks. To Claude she was "the perfect Gibson girl," the most desirable girl he'd ever seen, even if on French heels she was almost six feet tall—strong for a girl, *too* strong to suit *him*. "That's not fair, Claude."

"I know it wasn't, honey. I'm hoping it'll make you stop *her* before she gets people to laughing at *you*, too."

"That's the most—pre-posterous—I know that's why Jed was 'put with' me tonight. I'd rather be going with you."

"You would?" Eagerly the stolid, serious youth turned to her and then away quickly. "Ought've known better! Well, all I can say is old Jed may find out he's not as smart about women as he thinks he is before his fat Cousin Nettie's through with him!"

"And what does that mean, might I be so bold as to—"

"You might and some might tell you, but not me. Ask *anybody* from her home town what it was ran her husband off. And what the talk is about why she closed up her own home and moved in on Hadyn Hill."

"I'm ashamed of you, Claude—believing mean gossip about that dowdy old—"

"Not so old as you might think—her *ideas*, that is."

"Hush! I've heard there *was* some malicious gossip." She did not say her own mother had collected it, expanded it—well, grotesquely. "But Mister Calvin investigated. He *proved* there wasn't a *word* of truth in it. It was started by her husband's nephew. Mister Calvin made him apologize *publicly*."

"With the Hill Family's customary blacksnake whip in hand, I suppose?"

"Claude Bannion, you make me—oh, *so* mad. You're just jealous of Jed for no reason at all. I—I *hate* you for even repeating—"

"I—guess *that's* the truth, Laurine. I didn't much believe it—just wanted to, awful hard. Wanted *something* to clean old Jed's plow—"

"You used to like him."

"Still do—until he starts using all his looks and smart talk—and family to undermine me—with you." There was a strong whiff of Claude, but somehow not so objectionable. "Won't you promise me not to listen to a word he tells you?"

"I certainly won't." She used the low, throaty tones she had been practicing for tonight.

Easily, the tall girl vaulted over the wheel she had politely been waiting for him to turn. It wasn't ladylike, but for the best forward Sironia High girls' basketball team had ever had it was no effort. "Thanks for—bringing me home." She was through the wood-paling gate and had started up the gravel walk when he came up alongside.

"Tomorrow night?"

"Maybe, so—!" She was wiping-up-the-floor with him; but wasn't that what slaves like Claude were for? In fact, she told herself, as she closed him out with the front door of many-colored squares around a large one of clear glass, they won't know how to act otherwise!

She hurried by the dim, brown-papered hall's door to the parlor, past the door to her mother's and father's room and into her own at the rear. It was all pink and white. Rosebud wallpaper "matched" pink and white flounces at the windows, the bedspread and even the dresser scarf. She "hated" the matting on her floor, old and yellowish white. She had wanted her room done in yellow. Mother had preferred pink. Laurine thought pink too dainty for big girls. Their usual argument had ended with the usual result.

Just look! There on the pink and white bedspread lay neatly pressed dark red satin that made her look so—fast! She had told Mother she was wearing her pale yellow with the light green bows tonight. Where *was* it? In her clothes closet? Behind the pink and white screen which hid the washstand? No—not any place in the room. As many times before, Mother had hidden the dress she didn't want her to wear. Anger was rising. She honestly tried to hold it back. It was unrefined and cheap and—and *degrading* to have such scenes with her own mother. But Mother wasn't fair—she wasn't and ought to—On the red dress she'd noticed a small note pinned to it. She became a little sick. *That* again! She tried to tear it up, found her eyes taking it in with a glance:

> If you won't respect my wishes just this one time, all I ask is please wear this dress when I am dead and cannot worry you with my constant devotion to an ungrateful daughter! MOTHER.

The same old "from beyond the grave" trick! The first time Nanette had employed Death to get her way had been ten years ago. Laurine a child of seven had burst into sobs, fallen into "Little Mother's" arms begging to be forgiven, begging for the dress Mother wanted her to have. How many times since? No way of knowing. Each time submission (the girl had found) had come a little harder. The last time—a month or more ago—she had vowed it was the last.

But—it was so much *easier* just to give in. If this wasn't so—so obvious. Everybody had heard Jed Hadyn liked girls to wear red. Every girl in town had tried to marry him and just about every one had got herself a red dress—and been laughed at. He wasn't cruel—just spoiled by family, girls, the whole darn town!

She stood fists clenched against closed eyes, hoping the usual fury of helplessness would pass. It was passing. Fingers relaxed. Hands

dropped loosely. She took up the beautifully pressed red satin and hung it in the closet. Suddenly she threw it on the floor and kicked it into a corner. Then she went to her mother's door and knocked.

"Daughter?" the voice was weak. Meant to be musically soft, it was a whine.

Laurine entered the dark, stove-baked room and stood beside the maple bed.

Nanette Lane lay on her back, beneath a blue and brown crocheted throw. "Mother's having another of her wretched headaches." Not a word about watching from the parlor window: "Who brought you home, dear?"

The girl stilled angry hands, clenching. "Claude. Mother, where's my — "

"Claude *Bannion?* Oh, dear, what *can* you see in that — that side of raw beef? Sometimes I think you want to settle back in the slime like *all* the Lanes — satisfied to *stay* nobody."

"I *liked* Father's sisters — the only time I ever got to visit them — "

"What child wouldn't — with them using clothes and candy and even money to win you away from your own mother! It was your father's idea and a dagger in my heart. That's why he did it. Sneaking my child out of town to those — those — I'll not let myself say what! Well — he never repeated the offense!"

"No — not after the way you — "

"Laurine! Mother is enduring an agony that would put most women in the hospital." She turned small, exquisite face to the light. A tiny black-haired woman, delicately boned, delicately featured, it did not seem she could have borne a child as tall for a girl as Laurine. Still beautiful, every line in Nanette's face was sinking in and down, drawing with it the dainty mouth, thinning the eyes and "Dresden china" nostrils. The cause (she had told Laurine often) "wild horses could not drag from me" — except she left no doubt it was Stacey Lane's fault. (Almost unbelievably, it was.)

Laurine was crying, couldn't stop. She didn't like to oppose anybody, but when she knew something had to be done, she could force herself to do it, "see things to a finish."

"Mother, where did you put my yellow dress?"

The small figure, almost lost in the sink of soft mattress under the crocheted throw, stiffened. One pale, blue-veined hand appeared to pass weakly over waxy brow. Then both hands pressed fiercely to temples which must be throbbing in an agony no one but Nanette Lane could have stood so valiantly. "The pain — *pain!* No, don't fix me anything — but a little toast and tea. Have a good time at the party — "

"Aren't you and Father going?"

"How can I? This pounding torture—"

"I'm sorry. Mother—*where's* my yellow dress?"

The figurine sat up in bed. Flash of wide, dark eyes seemed to illuminate the darkened room. "Are you speaking to a *servant?*"

"No, Mother. All I asked was—"

"Meaning, I suppose, that your mother has stolen that tacky, nigger-yaller thing that makes you look big as a house!"

"*Where* is it?" When no answer came but gasped sighs, she went to Nanette's own closet, dug under the garments hung on wall hooks four and five deep. There! The yellow dress was wadded back next the wall. "Oh—Mother!" Every hook had been snipped off. She looked at the tiny gilt clock dial, all that separated two gilt, but remarkably lifelike, naked lovers. There was time. She was shaking the yellow out as she passed the bed.

"So!" Nanette was still sitting up, the skin over cheekbones so tightly drawn that all blood, all humanity had been forced from it. "You defy me! After I've slaved for you year after year! Given up *everything* I *ever* wanted so you could have the best. *This* is the thanks I get. I hope God strikes me dead to punish you. Then *you'll* suffer as I am—"

"Mother—you'll make yourself *really* sick."

"So-o, I'm just putting on! Well, just you remember I was only putting on when you look down in my coffin, and you'll never get the sight of me out of your mind so long as you live! I work my fingers to the bone to make a lady of you in spite of the Lanes. Just when I think I've succeeded, out comes the Common! It's coming out more and more. Don't think I haven't seen you when you thought nobody was looking—rubbing yourself up against any man that comes along. God only knows what you do I *haven't* seen—"

"Mother, that—" she was weeping violently, "that isn't *so!* This—the way we're carrying on is shameful. And over a dress! You know I don't care a thing about this one. It's just that it's a town joke about every girl who goes with Jed wears red so he'll—" She looked into ravaged face. Was self-respect, anything worth going through this? "I—I'm sorry."

"So—you've come to your senses!" Incredible—how deadly the calm that had come, how vanished all weakness and pain.

Laurine starting to lay the yellow dress across the foot of the bed, clutched it tightly to her again with both arms. "I *am* sorry!" She ran from the room.

"You!" Nanette's cry ended in a scream of mortal pain. A writhing jerk hurled her, from knotted covers, prone on the floor. Her legs were threshing, fists pounding. Shrieks, threats and accusations mingled so incoherently none had meaning. Saliva streamed from

lips in convulsion. Hideous thumpings, obscene twisting. Her filthy epithets filled the cottage. Worst of all was that moaning that faded to a whimper then rose again — and again.

Marshall had finally been got off for his annual adventure on Thaxton Hill. Next, Tam must be bribed into bed a few minutes early. The new puppy, for all his brindle lack of looks, was a treasure, kept Tammy interested when nothing else could. Puppies in Sironia never lived long. They sickened and died or turned up missing or got run over by one of Rogan's beer wagons; but they were both lovable and invaluable while they lasted. Each time Tam's heart broke, but it always mended with the advent of a replacement puppy — Blessed Virgin, please, *always* let his little hurts heal so — so easily and completely!

With the two of them in "the big bed" (a method infinitely treasured because Pop wouldn't stand for it) her wait until both child and puppy were asleep was not long. Assured of that, Moira turned down the damper of the stove to where there could be no risk of fire. She started to blow out the lamp. No, Miss Irma or some customer would be sure to ask Marshall why his house was dark so early the night of *her* "Last Friday." There was enough kerosene to last four hours in the new lamp.

She let herself out quietly, dark gray shawl reaching from head almost to the hem of dull red skirt. At the curb she looked all about her. Everybody in this town wanted to know everything about everybody. *She* was a fine one to be resenting that.

Second Street's loneliness made it more chill. Her long skirts and shawl points swinging with strides more masculine than she would use were anyone watching, she moved swiftly. She slowed to look up and down at every cross street. All were deserted. At Jeff Davis she turned south a part block to seize the wrought-iron-picket enclosure of a squat brick structure more belfry than building. Gethsemane Chapel of the Assumption was Sironia's only Catholic Church.

She'd had no *right* to kneel here for twenty years — almost to the day. She clung to its spearlike pickets an instant, as she did whenever she could unobserved. Mother Mary and Infant Jesus would understand. Suffocation seized her, went so deep it made this she was about to do less bad. It was something she was entitled to — partly anyhow. When furious with Marshall, she'd decide to come here, cast herself a supplicant for true mercy — knowing she could never so displease him. In the cold she knelt, faintly benumbed fingers busy.

With the last bead of smoked crystal still at her lips, she pushed

to her feet. Some force here was telling her she was wrong. If she lingered, it would forbid her, and she wouldn't dare disobey, would run home. She was going the — the rest of the way.

Up sandy River Road she trudged, drawing into the high bank's willow shadows at every sound, and then moving on. The Hugginses were home — by their lights. High society doings didn't change *their* plans. Even the dump grounds looked — nice in the moonlight. Nigger cabins' lights glowed dim orange from most of their tiny windows. Through cracks in some of their walls, too.

It was a shame for a good nigger like Mammy Henderson to have a daughter like that wild Lilybeth. Maybe, Lilybeth wasn't all to blame. Moira reckoned a black heart could break as quickly and completely as a white one. Only they usually didn't take it out in years of lonesome moping. Hadn't in Lilybeth's case, anyway. *They* were more sensible in "affairs of the heart." Just look at old Camel-face Nathalia Storrow! At eighteen — and the good Jesus only knew when that was, before the Civil War, anyway — Miss Nathalia had met a young fellow from New York at a party on Thaxton Hill — or so the old story of many contradictions ran. They had exchanged gifts and "corresponded" until the South seceded. Then she had "discarded" him; "of course," had refused to answer any of his letters after the War, refused to let him make a trip back here for her in 1866! Had never "looked at another man" since! Guess she hadn't looked like a camel *then*. Whether she'd had the chance she claimed or not, who could be sure? In spite of her bean-pole looks, she too was a romantic figure to a lot of people, especially young girls up to their curlpapers in first love. If stalking Sironia for years waving her broken heart like a banner was what Camel Face wanted, she was welcome to all its satisfactions — "daytime satisfactions," Moira called them. Of those two, it seemed to Moira, Lilybeth was the one who'd shown good sense. But if Marshall ever left *her* —

Now the Road was bending with the River and opposite Niggertown Bridge she turned up Palladium Avenue. Through the thick evergreens at the west base of Thaxton Hill she was seeing the lights, experiencing the same excitements she felt every year.

Halfway up Palladium, she halted, looked about her, took no chances.

Up along Main several early-arriving vehicles were standing. Some were hitched. Others had drivers, at their horses' heads, talking to other drivers. The "house party's" carriages! The reflection of moonlight on the slick black of leather, on sleek hides of fine horses sent little tremors of delight along her shoulders.

Thaxton Hill iron pickets were of the same height as the Chapel's but of a fancier, acanthus leaf pattern. As Moira knew well, the "side"

gate in Thaxtons' Palladium Street fence was easy to find. Its catch lifted easily, not too noisily. In a whirl of skirts and shawl fringe she was inside the gently sloping side yard. She moved up toward the tall, becolumned, temple-like mass of darkness shot with tall, evenly spaced, glowing rectangles.

That — on a piano unaccompanied — was "Gypsy Love Song." Marshall had been humming it ever since he'd heard it here for the first time last year. It had been his last waltz with his hostess, Moira had been carefully told by Nanette Lane the very next morning — early and in detail — and unnecessarily.

Through moon-blackened lilacs she made her way without the rustle of a leaf to the green-latticed pavilion. It wasn't so much a "summerhouse" as an ornamental structure to cover the old cistern which caught all rain from the great home's flat roof. Above the lattice, its metal cupola was very fancy but didn't look as pretty close to it as from Main Avenue. Winter dormant lilacs surrounding it had been cut away on the east side to give access to its only entrance. By standing on flat cistern top at its center, an almost complete view of the party could be had. Through the large windows of the front parlor and the double doors of the hall she could see into the library on the far side. Through the windows of the back parlor through the hall much of the dining room was visible. It was just as she remembered it from all those other "Last Friday" nights before. Twice she had wanted to do this and hadn't got more than a block from home before scurrying back. But *not* the third time — or afterward.

She had planned to get here before the big crowd began arriving. Some of them might come up the side way she had. Added to high expectancy was the thrill of doing something both Marshall and his Milly Thaxton would disapprove of heartily — if they ever found out! It was much the same kind of pleasure she derived from her sincere friendships with the occupants of 222 Second Street, the "notorious" old two-story green house a block down Second Street from the Lipscomb cabin. Marshall would just die if he knew she even spoke to them, much less had often had the manager (Moira never called her "the Madam") and one or more of her girls in for an early lunch — breakfast for them! Since there was only one real "society" in town, and Moira wasn't good enough for it, and she just couldn't *feel* an interest in her "new" church, she had the right to some friends. Certainly, no Thaxton could behave more ladylike than *they* did in her home. They could, Moira maintained to herself, give some of those invited *here* tonight etiquette lessons! Her one regret: they did come and go so frequently. The "managers" stayed in Sironia longer. Occasionally the place had to be closed, whenever Miss Carietta went on the warpath against "commercialized vice."

Moira had heard Marshall on that subject more than once: "God knows how many commission meetings will be entirely wasted, and what'll be *done*? Number Two-Twenty-Two will be closed a week or two!" He'd got red in the face, pounded a fist. "How that doll-faced Carietta Storrow can be as hardheaded as — No, a mule's not in it with her when it comes to being obstinate — as a *she*-bulldog — is something I'll never understand!"

"Hmm! Didn't know there *was* anything *you* don't understand, Mister Lipscomb." Moira had settled him, for once.

Moria's friends from *there* wore the *nicest* clothes — a little loud, maybe. Sometimes they helped her make up her own. They not only knew but could relate the most scandalous gossip. It was tidied up for her, Moira was sure. Marshall had never even suspected. So sure he knew everything! These more than pleasant thoughts were shelved now —

It was forming: this "Last Friday's" receiving line. In it were Miss Milly, Mister Calvin, Old Camel-Face Nathalia and Miss Carietta. Here the wall of the front parlor cut off the rest. Moira was sure that Marshall was as yet the only "caller." He always was first.

They were using the yellow paper roses the paper always mentioned — two years in succession! In one of the big tilted mirrors she could see reflected the white dancing canvas stretched over the carpets. Wonder how these rooms looked with all of their furniture in them instead of mostly carried upstairs to Pyramus' old room. What she could see of it was black mahogany, with curving backs and rich blue velvet — or plush, the same rich deep-sea blue as the heavy curtains. The draperies had cost fifty dollars a pair, Marshall had told her, with all the heavy tasseling and braid on edges, without the Store's making a cent of profit.

The back of the house, where the one-story kitchen jutted out, was even livelier than the inside. All the Thaxton niggers were here and all their relatives.

Big farm lanterns had been hung outside, and boards laid across trestles behind a canvas windbreak to take care of the serving. Food was always a big part of a big party, and about as much of it went into the Negroes, tonight and later, as into those invited. Scampering around like so many — monkeys, they knew how to enjoy themselves. In fact, Jed had told her she didn't miss much at these parties, because "the only ones who had a real good time were the niggers." Jed was wrong: just look at Mister Lipscomb!

There was a steady stream in and out the kitchen back door — the old "Slaves' Door" of the times when the house had been built. That door she could not see from here, but knew the little Greek portico over it and its big iron knocker. It was hard to explain how much for

granted all these took their being free and at the same time how proud they were of being descended from Hill Family slaves. She'd asked Mammy Henderson why. All she'd got was: "I don' try to splain things like dat, Miz Moira. De Reah-duns an' dey chillun wuz my pappy's whitefolks and dey's my whitefolks. My pappy wuz Black Judas ever'-body done heared 'bout. He saved his whitefolks' prop'ty in de War and dey ain't fergot it. 'Tain't slavery nor 'mancipation dat counts—but is yo' whitefolks wuth standin' by—or ain't dey? Mine *is!*"

Mammy traced her family back as carefully almost as her white-folks did. Black Judas had married Dido, shortly after both had been brought over on slave ships, about 1850, and been bought by Marse Gabe Thaxton. Of their numerous children, only Mammy (her baptizin' name Polyphemia no longer used) and Miss Milly's Melissa were left in Sironia. These were "the two branches o' de fambly" Mammy always proudly referred to.

Mammy had married "*Old* Fred" and their children, with some allowance for error, were Lilybeth born in 1875, young Fred in 1880, and Josie in 1885. (In addition there were the three who had "gone off" before 1900 and four or five, neither Mammy nor Old Fred was too sure about the number, who hadn't lasted through the always critical "first summer.") Melissa's children consisted of the Thaxton's Poppy, the Elliotts' Charlotte and Mr. Lance's Gum (Gamaliel). "Summer Complaint" had filled a number of small graves from this "branch," too. These were the Quality of Sironia's Negro population. They were invariably respectful in addressing her, but Moira knew they looked on her as "white trash." That didn't set very well with her hot Irish nature; but there had been times, especially when Tammy was a baby, when the only help in infant emergencies had come from these bighearted blacks.

In this light, anyone could imagine things. Moira was always helped not frightened by what only those like herself could see. Moon-light had formed a haze and from it materialized for her all the spirits which wanted to come back, and maybe some that didn't. Over there by the front stoop—that could be Pyramus, not a low, thick clump of cape jasmine. That distant clatter could be Philip Hadyn's horse charging over Reardon's Bluff. The shadows at the base of the hill were not just young crape myrtles but General Hugh and his Julia, General Pluto and his Sironia, Gabriel Thaxton and Temperance, the wretched mother of Pyramus. Moira in her years of service had heard enough talk to place all of them. Pyramus she had sympathy for. But not Renée nor any so namby-pamby as Little Teresa and her hair-combing mother.

Someone — not of those mists — was stirring the bushes. Moira crowded back along the rear lattice. It was Young Fred drawing after him a Negro girl. She was trying to protest convincingly but not loudly enough to bring help. They tussled inside the summerhouse door. Moira's exposure was a matter of seconds, with no possible explanation. Marshall would be furious if she were discovered —

"Fre-e-ed! *You,* Young Fred! Come heah 'fo I comes aftuh yuh!"

"Aw, shucks!"

There was not time for Moira to be weak with the narrowness of her escape. All the carriages in town, owned and rented, were trying to get up into the crescent drive, it seemed like, at one and the same time.

CHAPTER 5

YOUNG FRED swaggered cockily up to the "Slaves' Door." All the twenty or more other Negroes of just about every age were grinning, first at him and then at the slim black girl just now sauntering up the hill as if from Niggertown. They hadn't fooled anybody. Young Fred was pleased to see. Bullet-headed innocence became more exaggerated. "You want me, Mammy?"

"Why you reckon I wuz yellin' my head off? Heah — git ahold o' dat ice-cream freezuh an' you keep ahold and aturnin' 'til I tells yuh to stop. An' don't go movin' hit ovah by dat gal, neithuh. Stay right whar you is."

"Yas'm." Young Fred didn't just squat to begin turning, he seemed to melt inside his old black clothes and sort of slide down until he was at the right height to keep the canister turning in ice-salt pack. No mo' summerhouse doin's fer him tonight — it'd be freeze one can. empty hit in a bowl and pack it, denn freeze 'nuther one — till all dem millions dat wuz invited fer miles aroun' had filled deyselves.

With the noise of the crunching ice and squeaking ratchet on top of the freezer, young Fred felt safe enough to mumble about his leaving-out fer up No'th whar a cullud boy'd get treated right!

Low, widespread Mammy moving expertly about the great kitchen was "in her glory." Her whitefolks wuz givin' a big blowout, and had turned de whole "ree-fresh-ments" over to her. Ever'thing'd come out jus' right, too. Dem triflin' niggers out thar, all dey was good fer was to clutter up de yard and git in her way. She had shooed 'em out (all except Josie. Josie were young but she were good help). She'd fergit dem othahs until dey wuz needed to suhve. She didn't waste a move, except every few minutes to make the rounds of three tired-out and sleeping children, patting each. "Nelia!" "Ja'ed!" "Leah!"

High-ceiled, pine-boarded kitchen was a medley of the good smells it was every year. Miss Milly was governed by tradition when she fed her guests as well as when she approved or disapproved a family marriage. There were, as usual, the yeasty freshnesses of little rolls; shiny salted almonds; the tongue-curling spiciness of peach pickle, waiting all dull gold to be placed, one on each plate; the cold sweetness of freshly opened canned peas, pale green, wrinkled dots "all de way frum France"; and the slight fishiness from the great pans of 'scalloped oysters waiting to be baked. With never a written recipe to consult, she made the rounds of the kitchen, keeping Josie busy and seeing that Young Fred's mind did not wander too far to keep the crank turning. The coffee must go on right at eleven.

Outside Old Fred from time to time was seeing that the sawhorses and planks down from the attic for this one night were lined up right in the backyard for "he'pin' de plates." They had to run east and west to get around the downward slope to the north. All the Negroes made a great show of helping, carrying things over here from over there—then back. As Mammy said every year, "I'd git mo' done widout none uv 'em!" There was no way out of it. Miss Carietta would always send over *her* Melissa and one or two others. When Miss Milly borrowed Mammy from the Hadyns, it was assumed all of Mammy's family would come, too. Other guests offered their coachmen, and other coachmen offered themselves. Allowances had been made for feeding fifty besides those receiving invitations.

The kerosene lanterns hung out back seemed dim, at first, but natural exuberance and good spirits more than doubled their light. The reflection from grinning white teeth just about tripled it. Lilybeth was the center of things. When Mammy wasn't watching she kept up a steady murmur of talk from almost motionless lips. Great eyes stretched then narrowed in the handsome black of handsome face. Tonight Lilybeth had plenty to tell: little of it new—but the best part was.

Away back in 1840 or thereabouts (Lilybeth began) fire-eating old General Hugh Storrow had found "business" calling him away from Miss Julia. (The dove was the bird most often mentioned in connection with Julia at a time when everybody was an eagle, a wren or magpie in an age of ornithological metaphor.) What the nature of that business in New Orleans was, all the Thaxton and Storrow and Hadyn men knew well, but not even their Negroes mentioned it outside the family. The General hadn't been back in Sironia ten minutes with his body-servant, Black Judas, before the nigger grapevine had the facts. Judas' granddaughter, Lilybeth, was now bringing up to date the old story,

"All that there" in New Orleans had been "unfinished business." General Hugh, attending the 1839 Quadroon Ball, had found—as many before and after him—respite from strict "caste marriage." To him, Josefina de Lille was the loveliest of all the lovely "brunettes" in the old New Orleans Ballroom hired that night. To her mulatto mother he had seemed the best future for her daughter. To Josefina, too! Knowing he would never be in New Orleans more than a fortnight at a time, and couldn't manage more than four trips a year, the beauteous, dark cream Josefina hadn't been too difficult to persuade. That was where much of the Storrow third of the original Reardon Estate had gone. It made the Storrow branch the first of the Hill Families to be no longer among the very rich. General Hugh (a Moses in Sironia and bewhiskered satyr in New Orleans and unfortunately as prolific a letter writer as he was a father) had placed Josefina in "my one-story Paradise," built about a Rampart Street patio.

If Julia, his wife, or her sisters ever knew, they kept it to themselves. Such was family custom. It is certain that General Hugh admitted it to both brothers-in-law. It was necessary that it be confirmed by him. Both were supposed to have disapproved, although no less an authority than General Hugh, himself, was known to have said that both of them were "pea-green with envy, but too weak-bellied for successful emulation." That there would be a "complication" as General Hugh foresaw was inevitable. Not even he could have guessed that the fiery, magnificent Josefina would have that complication recorded on the New Orleans birth records as "Yvonne de Storrow!"

Grown to the highly marketable age of sixteen in 1857, Yvonne had made an arrangement similar to her mother's. She retained the "de Storrow," handing it on down to her own Ninon in 1870. Yvonne, the best manager of the lot, flourished until the carpetbaggers had finally been driven from Louisiana—or changed their ways. Then realizing her charms were going at forty-one, she had done some reading up on General Hugh's old letters from the trunks of Josefina who thriftily had kept them all.

In 1885, the resourceful Yvonne, bereft of generous carpetbaggers and receiving no replies to her numerous letters to Webley Storrow (grandson of General Hugh), had brought appealing fifteen-year-old Ninon to Sironia. They had brazenly registered at the *white* hotel as Mme. de Storrow and daughter. Webley's lawyer had told him that the payment she asked would be only the first of lifelong blackmail. He would pay nothing. Yvonne had then said she would "establish my child's birthright by law"!

It was here that Webley's "bride" of five years' standing, Carietta Cahoon Storrow, first saw the need (for that "firm hand") she was to see so often. In those palest of pinks and saffrons she was wearing the season of 1885–86, she had, as she never omitted pointing out, only "the strength of the weak."

She was confident, but not too confident. This was not a matter "fitting" for her to handle in person. These "creatures" had shown they welcomed the chance to be insolent to their betters.

In the great canopied "Reardon Mahogany" bed she hadn't — to her knowledge — slept a wink for three nights, deciding. Examining and rejecting ways and means, in the end she came back to the original premise. The method must fit the situation.

She sent for Pieter Hayden, brother to Philip and cousin to her Webley. Almost seven years younger than she, he had always "worshiped" her — never by spoken avowal, of course. She received him on the wide Storrow front porch, sitting so that moonlit white dogwood would shatter over bronze-gold hair and mauve organdy whenever she rocked back against it. There was confirmation in his dark eyes that neither she nor anyone else had ever looked more enchanting.

Tall, more blonde than she, with the sweetness of expression befitting a choir boy of twelve, although now twenty-one, he had sat on the porch edge at her feet. Melissa in the lilacs only six feet away had heard everything. "Cousin Pieter," Miss Carietta had said, leaning forward and *almost* stroking wavy light hair, "how often have you told me you would be forever grateful if I really needed you?"

"I — I don't know, Cousin Carietta." His young voice was earnest, thrilled. "A hundred times — at least!"

"Sweet, sweet!" She did not correct his estimate downward, but rocked back, and the shower of white petals was a virgin benediction. "I do need you now — very much!" (The boy could not stay seated.) "These — women who call themselves 'de Storrow' are shaming us. If someone would — take steps, and then *they* could be told that the respectable element of Sironia is giving them only twenty-four hours to get out of town before — need I say?"

"And you want *me* to — "

"Yes, Pieter. You are the *only* one I'd ask."

"Oh, Cousin Carietta—!" Dogwood, again jarred, loosed a cloud of beatitude. "I'll do anything you say."

Melissa's niece, Zenobia, was a hotel chambermaid at the time. The bashful, golden-haired Pieter had called, riding his chestnut gelding. Zenobia never hoped to see a handsomer couple than the two young people who faced each other when she opened the door to the parlor where the de Storrows were waiting. Zenobia couldn't catch what was being said for the key in the door and the heavy, fringed draperies. Whatever it was had gone on a long time.

It had been a great relief to Miss Carietta: the news that the two creatures had actually left town well within the twenty-four-hour limit she had set. It had been a great shock, too. Pieter had gone with them!

Nor was that the worst.

"Impulse! Sheer, tragic impulse!" Carietta was never one to admit family error. This last was based on one provision of Alpheus Reardon's will, long in trusteeship because of unclear wording. With all the male heirs "of age" as trustees, Pieter as the youngest, just turned twenty-one, had been assigned the collecting of rents and crop shares. His own interest was small, but he had now remedied that. He had taken all the undivided cash in the Trust's account! The fleeing trio could have been apprehended easily enough. But Pieter was not too much the choir boy to know that the old battle order, Storrow-Thaxton-Hadyn, would form to protect its own.

Carietta had had little difficulty believing Pieter had done this, too, for her. When reports kept coming back of his "insane devotion" to the magnificent Ninon (whom he had married!), Carietta was never as bitter as others in the family. In a way she was responsible. Since dear Pieter couldn't have the only one he'd ever really wanted—

In 1900's November, Carietta had received a letter frantic, even incoherent, from Pieter. It was the first in more than fifteen years. (It was here Lilybeth's story began.) Yvonne had been dead a long time. Two years before, his Ninon, too, had died—in childbirth. He had tried to go on, but was giving up, had just enough to bring their infant daughter "back home." She had once asked a favor of him. Would Cousin Carietta meet him for the last time on her front porch, the next Monday night—at midnight?

Many times Carietta changed her mind between receipt of the distracted letter and the moonless appointment. Even in the darkness, the glow from the hallway showed how time (and, as the autopsy showed later, tuberculosis of the throat) had changed a beautiful, beautiful boy into a sinister, dead-eyed "River-Gambler." Without asking, he had handed her the feather-light bundle (two years old and so small!). With her own Charles barely five that had been all that

was necessary. Quickly she looked at the tiny sleeping face, but not quickly enough to escape the rasp that had once been deep resonance in his voice, "No, Cousin Carietta — she's only one thirty-second Negro. That's whiter than many believed to be all white. She won't have much chance — here, but I haven't anyplace else — and no time to find one — "

"I have money here — for you — "

"No!" It was certain he meant it. For that moment the dimness unselfishly yielded back a large measure of choir-boy innocence. "I've had my share."

"What *are* you going to do, Pieter?"

"My child is *home!*" He smiled as once he had, possibly for the first time in years and possibly the last so far as any of them ever knew. "Let that be — enough. You will look after — her?"

"Why, of course. I'm glad that you know — how it'll have to be. I've already arranged for Mammy Henderson to look after her for a while. Then I'll have her here as my — Can it be any other way, Pieter?"

One withered hand gouged sunken eyes even farther inward. "What *is* to become of my precious little Bijou?"

"Bijou? You will stay with us until you are — well?"

"Well?" His laugh was almost jeering. Then cadaverous face became tender. He bent, uncovering one bare little foot and kissed it, then rushed fiercely down the sloping walk. He paused at the gate for a long last look. Any of Hill blood would have.

"Melissa!"

"Yas'm?" The answer seemed to come from the front lilacs, although she had been told explicitly to wait in the kitchen.

"Here *it* is. Mammy Henderson is waiting up — "

"Yas'm. She done tole de chillun dey goner have a s'prise in de mawnin'. My! Hit don't weigh nothin' 'tall hardly."

"I won't have a *word* of this repeated!"

"No, ma'am!"

"And — oh, yes, tell Mammy this is her little — grandniece named — Leah — Leah *Smith!*"

"An' jus' like dat, *she* up and change dat chile's name!" Lilybeth's recountal was drawing to a repetitious and reluctant close. She was not running low on material, but Mammy could be seen coming across the kitchen to the Slaves' Door to get them back to work. "An' de strangest paht o' all," Lilybeth finished breathlessly, "heah Mammy's got dem two babies, Miss Nelia and Leah to look after. Bofe dey mothers died whin dey was borneded and bofe dey daddies killed deyselves — an bofe dem babies looks almos' jus' alike — mo'n any *fust* cousins evuh you did see."

"You — Lil-lybeth!"
"Yas'm, we's gettin' de trostles sot up *jus'* lak you said."

Inside, Marshall was eager. This was almost as much his favorite night of the year as it was Milly's.

After nine now, guests were arriving in clots. Some were kept waiting to get inside the front door, waiting on the receiving line, waiting to be told where to put their wraps. "Ladies in de *eas'* front rume, upstairs, please ma'am: gen'lmen in de *wes'* front rume, please, suh!" All the main first floor was "thrown into one" by opening the folding doors. The rich blue, scrolled design on heavy cream wallpaper and its heavy blue velvet draperies were for the most part hidden by smilax heavy hung with the yellow roses. Like the guests, the tissue blossoms looked washed out under the sometimes wavering, sometimes hissing chandeliers, now converted to gas. The black broadcloth of the men separated into glowing spots the richly colored, heavy fabrics of "full evening gowns," their white backs, arms and for the most part *bounteous* bosoms. Close, acrid scent steamed from great vases of white chrysanthemums. Under the curve of the stair's graceful, unsupported spiral a string orchestra sawed away behind a row of dutiful if dejected palms. These with minor replacements were rented and appeared at every Sironia reception or ball of any size.

The receiving line began just far enough inside to allow Old Fred to swing wide the front door and bow low. Every year someone asked Miss Milly if she wasn't going to have the receiving line in one of the front rooms, so that her guests could shed their wraps, freshen up their pompadours and ruffles and "come down the line" looking their best. And every year Miss Milly said, "The time to welcome my guests is when they *enter* my home, not after they've been wandering around like lost souls for hours!"

Full-hipped and -bosomed she stood now at the head of the line, grayish-brown hair high-swept above face radiant with the zest for "gracious living." Shining brown eyes were both kindly and arrogant. Black jet on black net fan was spread, and black jet on black net fitted close about tightly corseted plumpness, clacked at every movement. From the white skin of upper arms between black kid and black net and from her "tastefully low" decolletage the White Rose scent she used exclusively came as part of her. A seven-strand pearl dog collar held firmly the slight sag of slightly sallow throat. Already the pearls were her trademark. "This night," the society editress of the weekly *Sentinel* had already written, "the chatelaine of this, one of the most lovely and tradition-garbed sanctuaries of true hospitality, was a

marble masterwork of Michaelangelo, a canvas which would put to shame a Titian, a Rubens or a Veronese, her voice the aria that Verdi must have been seeking all his years only to die in disappointment ere he found it."

To Marshall Lipscomb, standing in the front window of the front parlor (impeding Moira's view, as it happened), Milly seemed all that, at least. If there was any part of these evenings he liked best, it was when he could stand here, after all the explanations to Milly and Calvin as to why Moira couldn't come this year. He could watch and talk comfortably with other men. They knew how his accounts and holdings were growing every year, and their wives, to judge by the changing looks in their eyes at greeting were beginning to know. If he got much richer, they'd be actually meaning it when they said "I must run in to see dear Moira — *real* soon."

It was perfect, the way Milly handled her guests. She devoted the exact amount of time each was entitled to. Great bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums served a thousand uses in her infinitely varied gestures. Her black jet fan was retrieved from the end of its dangling jet chain for those who rated a playful tap. The ladies received a formal nod with mitigating smile, sometimes a clasp from both hands, or if related a friendly pat. How *could* she say the same thing over and over and with exactly the right emphasis every time? She would pass each on to Calvin, handsome and affable, but tired to death of the whole thing since 1891. He would pass each on to Miss Nathalia. She always wore white (which infuriated Carietta for whom white by tacit agreement was reserved whether worn or not) and used liquid chalk. Cousin Nathalia, Calvin decided over again every year, could never have been as lovely as she intimated she had been in her youth — whenever that was. But there was no doubt about her purity — none whatever! It was very unsettling at one of these ordeals of Milly's, bad enough in themselves, to be constantly finding himself wondering where in the world they were going to find a coffin long enough — when and if Cousin Nathalia ever died. Calvin caught Marshall's eye, saw him shaking in noiseless, midriff merriment, his handsome red face calm and placid enough to fool even Cousin Nathalia.

What made it worse was Milly's insistence about poor Lance. "What *would* people think if Launcelot weren't here to welcome people to his *own* home — the home he'll be master of some day?"

Their boy was trying. Next to Cousin Nathalia, no one could go very far wrong. He wore the new black broadcloth ordered for him from Atlanta. A little too erect, with the extra-frilled shirt front his mother insisted on and the extra-full white tie, he was the most compelling figure on the floor until — always that same "until" — his

brooding rich brown eyes were met squarely. Then the commanding aristocracy of the high-bridged nose became the meaningless thing it was. The sharply chiseled lips would waver in a sickly smile, "heart-rending" in its effort to please.

"And you know Lance, of course," Miss Nathalia pressed her thin elbow against him and continued significantly, "Postmaster and Mrs. Stacey *Lane*, Lance!"

"O-oh, yes. Glad to have you with us — this — evening — Postmaster-and-Mrs.-Stacey-Lane."

"Thanks, Lance," came from the weary-eyed, dumpy little man and "Delightful!" from the dark, intense Nanette at her dimpled charming best. Never quite sure each year until they actually had received their invitation, she must show all in hearing distance "a thing or two." "I do believe this is the *very* pret-tiest party Milly's ever given. But I always think that — *every* year!"

"Just — what I was saying to — to — somebody." From Lance's wide, pleading smile, every trace of Thaxton regality was gone. "Just — what I — "

Marshall turned toward the front door. From out on the porch came a steady spatter of talk. Selma Rogan had arrived. She must be getting more confident to wait this long: usually she and Oscar were among the very first. Marshall could remember her when she had been as trim and vivacious a girl as the town had, but "With a husband and a son, Selma Rogan for the first time feels entitled to eat as she's always wanted to!" Hazel Elliott had said. Still a pretty woman and not too fat, Selma Thurston Rogan must be doggone flabby to the touch when she took off all that tight lacing under mauve satin. An evening like this was to her probably the main reason for living. Old Oscar Rogan didn't exactly dislike himself in long-tailed white and black! As he half listened to those about him, Marshall could see the faint winces produced by the new arrival's "Cousin Milly!" her "Cousin Carietta!" "Cousin Na-*thal*-ee-ah!" and on down the line. Calvin's was the only "*Cousin* Selma" Marshall heard. This, was, he knew, another of Sironias countlessly changing situations. As Oscar Rogan's fortune increased, Selma (unlike Nanette Lane) could live less and less with the fear that some day Old Fred bearing "Last Friday" invitations might leave nothing for the Rogans. It was almost as if the buxom, vapid-faced Selma instead of gushing party platitudes were muttering, Another five or ten years, Milly Thaxton and Carietta Storrow, and the shoe'll be on the other foot.

A small, goatee-ed old man was tottering past Calvin. "Nathalia, my dear."

Old Camel Face responded right on beat, "*Cli*tus! You know Launcelot, of course. The boy thinks the world of you — Judge Clitus Tre-vel-yann, Lance."

"Who?" Lance smiled in universal affection over the white-whiskered little judge's withered claw. "You know what — you act *just* like a wild turkey I saw up on North Fork yester — "

"Delighted — delighted to see you, my boy, getting more like your distinguished forebears every — "

"There weren't but *three* — bears!"

"Er-humph! Quite right, quite. Nathalia, am I to have the *great* honor of escorting you in — ?"

"Indeed, you *are*, Clitus!" Caught without defense for once, the tall, wraithlike figure was grateful. "Come for me when the line breaks up and — How *do* you do?" In the droning buzz all about, she hadn't caught the names of these two men — probably business friends of Calvin's. "And I'm sure you already know Launcelot Thaxton, Mister — mmmmmm — mmmmmm — Launcelot!"

"Who did you say, Cou-sin Na-thalia?" the wide young forehead wrinkled anxiously, "I didn't understand their names."

"Now, now, Launcelot! The boy gets so fidgety standing in line, has to have his little *joke*. Such a *keen* sense of — "

"But — I'm *not* — jo — "

"Now, now!" A long kid glove reached over in front of Calvin and drew forward two of the Hicks connection from Mississippi. This forced the "obviously nobody" unknowns on down to Cousin Nettie. Honestly, that woman! The way she had practically forced herself on the orphaned Hadyns when there had been so many others better fitted. Nathalia, herself, had been willing to make the sacrifice. *She* had waited a decent interval before offering her services, only to find Nettie had flounced herself down upon them and got Carietta on her side. Carietta!

The crowd was coming so thickly now it didn't matter what was said so long as one looked cordial, kept talking and kept the line moving. What in the world was that man — Nathalia raised her gunmetal lorgnette to look over into the front parlor — what *was* Marshall Lipscomb constantly turning to look through the window down toward Main for? Was he afraid poor darling Moira was going to rebel and invade the place? Miss Nathalia for almost ten years now had had ready what she was going to say when that happened. She was going to put everyone at ease, retrieve a most hideous situation. Everyone would say, "Nathalia Storrow has saved the day *again!*"

Marshall was not concerned with *that* "hideous" possibility: another was too imminent. He had promised Milly to keep a lookout. The time had come. The Elliotts' fringe-topped surrey had driven up to the front steps. Pomphrey got painfully down from the front seat, holding the reins of the County's most spirited span of dappled grays. Bill sprang out of the rear seat and turned to assist a woman — a large bundle, rather.

Marshall assumed it was Hazel. No one could have been sure who — or *what!* — was concealed in the great cape of dull green velour heavily appliqued in gold. A bit of gingery frizz did show through masses of lavender tulle above its flaring gold collar. Now the Elliotts were coming across the wide porch. Bill's slow, hesitant strides and Hazel's high-heeled chop-chop showed plainly the spirit with which each advanced. Kerosene porch lamps caught Bill's face. Spade-shaped upper lip was set between windblown muttonchops. He was both miserable and — resigned. There was no feeling in common between the Elliotts now.

Beside the wide doorway from the hall to the parlor, Marshall took post. He had promised Bill he'd stand by for any emergency. Should Milly take this chance to even things publicly with Calvin — as many a wife would — only Marshall would be able to do much about it. Now Hazel was directly in front of her hostess. Their eyes were almost on a level. One small skinny hand dripping lavender tulle poked out from heavy folds of green velour.

There was an instant of complete cessation of life, less than a second, but long enough for Marshall to resolve that if Milly took this chance to do anything — anything spiteful, he'd —

"How do you do, Mrs. Elliott!" There was no expression in the greeting, none in the face above seven strands of pearls visibly tighter about quivering white throat. "And Mister Elliott!" She turned to Calvin (an exhibit ready for the waxworks' Condemned Murderer's Group) and said levelly, "The Elliotts!" and instantly "Oh — *Tri*-ina!" to Trina Storrow, who had a little *too* obviously been waiting near the front door. "It *is* fine to see you — and looking *très chic,* too!" although Trina, as drab and dowdy a Storrow as ever had been, had arrived right after Marshall, to be in the house party. Milly had taken no risks of having the Elliotts "hang on the line."

It was all over. What might have been a high point of gossip for months to come was done for in less than four seconds.

In choosing Trina Storrow to help her, Milly had been very wise. Trina was that rarest of the species, a poor relative who asked for nothing and whom everyone liked. Everyday plain and good-natured, she admitted freely she must've been born to be a wallflower. "And since that's the case, I might as well be a good one!"

All of Marshall's and Bill's planning had been unnecessary. Hazel was near to prancing, green velour flapping and filmy lavender flouting out behind her. Just listen to her: "Miss Nathalia! You are lovely tonight — but then you always *are!* You know Bill — Mister Elliott! And *Lance!* Don't you turn those big brown eyes away from me in such a hurry — I'm not two hundred years old — yet, you charmer!" The boy flushed with relief, not because he was being complimented but because there was no conversational space left for him to fill.

"And this must be the marvelous Nettie Hicks Vaughn! I've heard about the *wonderful* home you are making for the Hadyn children. Bill, dear, *this* is Mrs. Vaughn. You know Mrs. Storrow!" Hazel's "reception smile" made a winter-withered apple of knife-thin, tulle-swathed sallowness and swept Bill instantly past Miss Carietta before that lady had a ghost of a chance to murmur in softest whisper what she had carefully in mind to murmur. In the very best of taste, it would have come back later to rankle in the creature's brain — if such she had! That was the insidious thing about Carietta's intimate little whispers. They made no wound, caused no pain — at the time. Spoken so softly, so patronizingly, few ever *heard* them distinctly, except those for whom they were intended.

Exhaling his first full breath in five minutes, Marshall was sure nothing could have been handled more smoothly. If Milly and Hazel had been over-cordial it would have deceived no one. Just possibly in the process, one of them might have said something the other would have taken the wrong way. And then — ! ("Oh, God," Marshall begged, as many times before, "don't *ever* let Milly learn what I've known so long!") Speak — *think* of the devil — look yonder!

Hazel, finishing her vivacious sweep of the receiving line and turning all her wrappings toward the curving stair to go to the cloakroom, had run squarely into a tall man. Mostly sick gray skin, black broadcloth, white linen and steel-colored hair, he was bone-thin. No color was in face or dry lips. In his cultured, deferential bearing only metallic eyes were at variance — nothing gallant or courtly about *them,* Marshall decided.

"Madam, I beg your — " he began. Recognition came to both at the same moment, " — your pardon."

"Oh — yes — my fault, I'm sure." Hazel's superb composure was gone. She tucked her frizzy little head down into its tulle wadding and scuttled up the stair. Bill was left face to face with the other's waiting look. "Hello — Tom." Bill stuck out a thick freckled hand.

The other took it. "How are you — Bill?"

"Fine!" Sironia — or "all of it that counted" — stared, goggled and gawked. Hazel and her brother, Young Tom, hadn't spoken since her marriage to Bill. This wouldn't change things, but it was good to have town opinion borne out: Nobody could dislike Bill Elliott. This might be interesting yet. Neither wanted to be first to end it.

"If you'll excuse us, Tom, I'll help this rascal go on up and take off his new overcoat — from Lipscomb's, I might say!"

"By all means, Marshall." Whatever might be the stories about Young Tom's carryings-on up at Syringa, nobody could say he didn't have the bearing of a gentleman, or if Jed was to be believed, "enough manners for two genuine gentlemen."

Jed Hadyn, himself, was making a fairly good "best of a bad bar-

gain." He hadn't wanted to come, *never* wanted to come to these "things of Cousin Milly's." He always had, guess he always would. Cousin Nettie had suggested that it was only common decency for him to take her over with his date. This he had refused to do. Since that morning in his tower room, he had avoided her except at meals, had eaten as often as possible with tenants at the farm. Tonight without being asked, he had been "put with" Laurine Lane. More and more possibilities were being revealed.

The girl was pretty, even more than that. In tight, dark red satin, any girl looked her best. As they sat in one of the green-smilax and yellow-rose bowers the assisting decorators had created almost at will, Laurine did most of the talking, did it well to be only nineteen. Jed was wondering. Instead of the usual thing, she might just possibly do for what he was going to need before long. The family wouldn't stand for his replacing Cousin Nettie without a good reason. He wasn't sure he had one. The only way to get *her* out of the house before she grew old on their hands was to make a home for Nelia and himself *now*. The only way he could do that — to suit the family — would be to marry — somebody. Not just anybody was going to be the family's idea of the *right* wife. With himself, it wasn't so much the old restriction of "family" as whoever he married had to be good for Nelia. He'd seen this girl around town, looked on her as a child. But tonight — ?

He was telling her with his eyes that she knew where he wished they were instead of here, and what doing. He was thinking she wouldn't let him do a thing, might fill the vacancy quite well. True, he hadn't yet brought up the Hadyn Heavy Artillery in private and a fellow had to *know*. Marriage was serious business for a Hadyn. If a girl was too easy with *one*, how about with the *next?*

He let her talk on. Yes, siree, the girl had distinct possibilities — two of 'em. Better cut *that* out! The dancing would begin before long. Small white programs with the Thaxton crest on the outside and twelve dances and two extras inside would have to be filled. He must *ask* Cousin Milly and Cousin Carietta — Cousin Nathalia, even. They always told him, "No, indeed! Go on and dance with one of these lovely girls," then before he *could* — graciously accepted! Whatever he was going to find out — about Laurine — had better be in a hurry. The old summerhouse he had been considering for some time through a back-parlor window might suffice. Probably dusty from lack of use, but dark red dresses didn't soil easily: another reason he liked the color. He didn't interrupt Laurine, but opened both their programs on his knee, steadied gently against hers. His pressure on one small program pencil pushed the point through the cardboard and broke it. He let it dangle and used the other, sweeping diagonally across the first six dances on one program with "Jed" and on the other's with

"Sweetness." Her breath caught and all her easy words stopped. The dark red of her dress seemed to sweep up the gorgeous white bosom and into the beautiful face of full lips and dark, heavy-browed eyes. Without a word from either, they rose, were moving toward the back door behind the orchestra — Oh, hell: look, bearing down on them!

"Jedediah!" How he heard anything murmured so soft and low with all this reception hubbub he couldn't tell, unless it was because he always seemed to hear what he didn't want to. This time he *wasn't* going to. He took the firm, white upper arm next him. "Let's hurry!"

"Je-ed-ee-*di*-ah — oh, *Jed!*"

"Miz Ca'ietta's acallin' yuh, Mistuh Jed!" Old Fred's white-gloved hands were lowering a block of ice in the cutglass punch bowl at the foot of the stair.

"Oh — " He turned back. "Hello, Cousin Carietta!"

Now that she had him cornered, she pretended to be out of breath, fanned delicate chest of "whited alabaster" above classic drapes of palest lavender. Whether by design or not, a shower of white peony petals from her "arm bouquet" fell at her feet. "Lau-rine, dear!" Miss Carietta had bowed her ringleted brown head so that brown eyes looked engagingly out of their tops, "You're the loveliest thing I've *ever* seen — in all my *hundred* years — "

"Why, Miss Carietta, you're the *youngest* girl here."

"Lis-ten to the child, Jed! She's just saying that because she knows I'm about to introduce her to the most attractive bachelor I've ever *seen*. My husband was the most attractive *married* man. He really was: a charmer through and through!"

(Through cheesecloth? Jed beamed *without* sound or lip movement.)

"You're in Laurine's and my way, Jed. Let me see — why don't you go over there and ask your Cousin Trina for the next dance?"

"Because she just can't seem to stay on my feet — always slipping off! Besides, Laurine and I were just — "

"Jedediah! Just for that I'm taking Laurine *away* from you. This attractive man I mentioned won't be here long. I've told him *so* much about her. And I'm awful, but I believe I *did* tell Trina you'd be right over. Run along, Jed. Not another word out of you!"

"A little later, I'll be *glad* to, Cousin Carietta, but not — "

"You forget — dear," It seldom took a third "dear" to get her results. "She's expecting you — *now!*"

"Oh, well," emphasis made it sound like something else, "I'll be back, Laurine." He broke off a bit of palm leaf. "*This* is for remembrance!" As one hand extended it, his other hidden by the low palm fronds brought its thumb and forefinger suddenly together close inside a skirt fold of red satin.

"Laurine, dear you *are* twittery at your first grown-up dance!"

"It's—it's a *palm* I backed into—"

"Well, I'm not surprised—after that pretty speech of Jed's. But just between us *don't* you believe him. When he seems most sincere, he's really most unreliable. What I could tell you about that boy!" roguishly, softly as she steered Laurine away.

It was never any trouble to find Trina at a dance. Once she got there—which wasn't often—and found a chair she pretty much stayed in it. Even when relatives dutifully led her out to dance, they always dutifully led her back. It seemed a kind of "Hill Family courtesy to remember and get her back in the *same* chair. Only eighteen, Trina had looked like this since she was twelve and would look like this until she died (mercifully soon, in view of her tragic marriage). Tall, slender and neutral in color, complexion and temperament, she was often almost pretty but never quite; almost a good dancer but not quite, to Jed "just another ash-can blonde." As Carietta had said and was to keep on saying for some months, "Trina *is* sweet and *so* thoughtful. I'd be the last to deny her that. But every time I see her placid acceptance of the way she's treated by everyone, I could—shake her! I'd just like to see anybody treat *me* that way!" (So would have a number of other people.)

"It's real nice of you, Jed—to dance with me. But I just *wish* Cousin Carietta wouldn't—"

"Now, Trina, you're just fishing for compliments when—" He tripped over one of her more than ample feet. There was a low rip of the yellowed, white battenberg yoke of her bodice. "Drat the wrinkles in the canvas!"

There was both gratitude and love in her shamed eyes, as he changed feet hurriedly.

"Look your best, Trina," he cautioned. "Caleb Hone and his spouse, The Great Stone Face, have their pads out for "Society Jottings!"

"You ought to be ashamed! Mrs. Hone *is* a little—cold, but she's *so* nice!" Trina thought everybody was nice. Right now Jed didn't think anybody was—but that Laurine gal.

At eleven, Marshall was dancing with Hazel and completely under her pert, matter-of-fact spell. What if her Nile-green crêpe neckline *was* overhung with that "tacky" W No. 302 passementerie? Already thirty-five, she was still the best dancer in the room, and Marshall's rounds with a good dancer were scarce enough these days. For the first few minutes of a Thaxton-ized, toned-down "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," they were completely taken up in the success of their two-step. It incorporated Marshall's latest specialty, a long "run"

with her rushing backward swung to his right. Now they were in an offside eddy of the round-and-round stream, had the far side of the front parlor to themselves. ("I'd never have to worry if they were all as homely as that frisky little buzzard!" Moira was commenting to herself, hugging her forgotten shawl more closely about her.)

"Does Bill appreciate such a good dancer in his family?"

"Why don't you ask *him?*"

"You women! *Always* scheming to remind your husbands how lucky they are!"

"Well, it's a cinch," wry grimace said such slang had no place here, "if *we* don't, nobody will. How's Moira?"

"Just fine. So crazy about that blame boy of ours, she—" He felt Nile-green crêpe with all its fancy trimmings stiffen, could have kicked himself for mentioning children. It was too late. This ugly little—er—firecracker was sure he'd done it on purpose.

"And she's a right to be, but—" and what followed was pure Hazel, "—if you treated me like you do her, Marshall Lipscomb, you'd get your eyes scratched out!"

From any other woman, this would have called for sudden silence, complete absorption in their dancing. She was too direct, always hit the nail she aimed at right on the head and did it so honestly, if testily, that a fellow had begun defending himself before he realized he'd better say nothing at all. When Hazel asked questions so personal as to be presumptuous, before a man thought to resent them he'd told her the answers. "You think it would be better if I let Moira come here to be picked to pieces by Mrs. Lane and—*that* lavender helping of oversweet whipped cream?"

Hazel shook so in his arms he stopped talking, knew he shouldn't laugh at his own description, but neither of *them* claimed to be "refined." "Do you, Hazel?"

"*I'm* here!"

"You certainly are!" He gave her the specialty backward dash across an expanse of unwrinkled canvas, no longer easy to find. "But *you* can control your temper—to some extent, that is—or can give tit for tat. Moira can't do either."

"And—*you* can't forget she was once Sylvia Hadyn's maid!"

"No."

"Well, anyhow, *you* don't fool yourself, either. That's something we've got that *they* haven't, and never will—oh, oh! Our hostess is looking this way—disapprovingly. Well, it's her party. So—if you'll excuse me—"

"I'd like to paddle you right here."

"So would Bill! Now get along—I'm going over to dig him out of—lavender whipped cream."

He gave one of Calvin's courtly bows. Hazel responded with one of Carietta's airy-fairy girlish dismissals involving smile, fan and eyelashes. There was more than one stifled tribute in the crowded room. Little snapping-turtle eyes gleamed.

As it never missed doing, Marshall's heart crowded his chest. The music stopped and he stood before the night's masterpiece of black net, shining jet and pearl collar. He bowed from the waist as she herself had taught him more than twenty years ago. (They had both thought he had only to learn, among other things, to bow like a gentleman and a few other things and all would be as it should.) "Calvin, may I claim an encore with my — magnificent hostess?"

"Only magnificent?" Imperiously Milly threw back graying pompadour with a faint accompaniment of White Rose and soft clack of jet. "*Last* year I was 'superb.' Am I fading, then?" Quirky little smile demanded while it denied more flattery.

"You two!" Calvin observed dryly. "Sorry I can't oblige — but I find it impossible to be jealous when my feet hurt, and patent-leather is an invention of the devil!"

The be-diamonded white hand on Calvin's forearm directed attention to his acutely pointed dancing-shoes. "Change them, then, oh, my martyr — before you insult my guests! Besides, *this* year you don't deserve all of my first dance!" Both knew what she meant. "Calvin! Where's Launcelot? He was in line a *second* ago. I'm — "

"He asked to be excused. Knowing exactly how he felt, I told him all right."

"Cal-vin! Marshall, do *you* see *how* I put up with — " Her face told Marshall that Hazel and Bill were dancing past behind him, now were gone. "Calvin, I know the boy doesn't enjoy these Fridays. They *are* rather light for a confirmed student, but *don't* let him sit around — out back!" She smiled uneasily up at Marshall. "Launcelot is — is making a — study of — of customs of old slavery days. Gets such valuable information from the — sources. Awkward — in a way. With every girl in the County crazy to dance with him, and he *is* the best-looking man here — except possibly my awful nephew. Heavens — He's not rid of poor Trina yet! Been dancing with her for hours, and I know whose doing it was! Run along, Calvin, you and your poor feet. Marshall's — er — impatient again."

"Still! Ever since last November!"

"Mar-shall! This is what makes *all* the trouble worthwhile." It was the same Milly, in spite of age; the ways life had found to gnaw ceaselessly at her heart; *and* all else, including Hazel Elliott. She swept up the great train of shining, rattling, black and hung its looped velvet rope over the black-gloved wrist holding tiny jet fan. Her huge wad of yellow chysanthemums was shifted over the loop. She gave the

orchestra leader a *definite* glance. There was sudden cessation of "After the Ball." Almost immediately there came "Blue Danube," a torrent of melody which swept over him as overpoweringly as Sironia's own river in flood stage. They began dancing. Something was wrong: Composer Strauss, it seemed, had written it in too fast a tempo. Only Millicent Letitia Thaxton Thaxton had noticed. She stopped dancing. She frowned. One black-kid finger became a metronome. The orchestra complied. She smiled. Now the tempo was *right*.

She nodded again, this time to Marshall. He might recommence. His right hand still enveloped in a handkerchief of pure linen washed white-white by Moira passed about her and the chrysanthemums, to rest lightly against the back of what felt like a coat-of-armor draped in crisp Vogue-75 veiling. With Hazel, he had swung into step, moved off effortlessly. With Milly that wouldn't do. With her, he must be careful, methodical—and more. He raised his left palm, held it until she barely touched it with her right. He faced toward Main. Their outstretched arms pointed straight and rigid due east toward the Court House. Not spoken, but implied: One-two-three—*begin!* They were moving. Jed's summary came back to Marshall unavoidably: "Aunt Milly waltzes with all the verve and abandon of a glacier forming a moraine." When others bumped into them, it was *never* she nor Marshall who was responsible. Yellow-petaled and bitter-fragrant, the golden blossoms bobbed in heavy rhythm over the looped-up train. Marshall reveled in the pungent scent of bruised petals, in the occasional cling of jet to his right wrist. Always amazing was how light-on-her-feet she remained—how easily *followed!*

After two encores "The Beautiful Blue Danube" (nowhere else so beautiful or so blue to Marshall) ceased to flow. She led the way toward the east wall of the dining room and Great-grandmother Restraint's enormous mahogany breakfront. Not immediately did Marshall know why.

First she handed Marshall her flowers. Then the tiny jet fan. Her hand slipped from the black loop. She arranged her train by taking two steps toward the breakfront and pivoting to her left to face the room. By pressure too slight for notice she adjusted the mechanics of her armor, reclaimed from him her bit of a fan and her flowers.

As this ritual was completed, Carietta Storrow advanced from the back parlor on the other side of the house, through the wide hall, in front of the orchestra and into the dining-room. "Mil-li-cent—I just noticed your new porcelain—but this m-a-an!" She tapped perspiring Stacey Lane with a gold-sticked Watteau-scene fan, then stood so that anyone directly in rear could see black jet was visible on *both* sides of her lavender. "Wouldn't *let* me stop. When *did* it come?"

"Oh—" the thought of anyone's preventing Carietta from doing

anything was arresting, "you mean my Dresden service?" as if she had hundreds of sets of dinnerware. "It *is* rather nice, I think. Certainly, there was enough to-do getting it. The German government wanted it for some stuffy old museum, I believe. *Just* arrived—"

"How—" although, Marshall suspected, Carietta was letter-perfect in the adventures of every cup and plate, "—exciting!"

Milly's smile was charming, including as it did a near-smirk at Jed's using the "Dresden" gathering to "lose" Trina. Cousin Nettie puffed her way into the growing circle as Milly began, "Doctor Chylton—of the State University's Art Department, you know—has had his eye on this set—scattered *all* over Germany—for some time. It was sold piecemeal years and *years* ago by impoverished heirs of the *titled* family it was made for. Doctor Chylton went to no end of trouble to assemble it for me. And *after* he had gone to all the trouble—and not a *little* expense," this with just the right show of modesty, "the German Government's Director of—some awful German word for one of its innumerable departments—almost had its shipment out of the country banned by the Reichstag! It's a long story how poor Doctor Chylton got it over the border for me. Carietta, you know porcelain: notice the glaze on this tureen—" She halted at sudden confusion. A small woman was apparently *climbing*, and roughly, over the encircling crowd in her eagerness to get a better view. Beautifully sculptured mouth-bow straightened with an ominous clack of jet. "Mrs. Ell-i-ott, do come nearer. We'd *so* like to have *your* opinion on porcelain!"

Freckles under frizzy brick-dust hair stood out against splotchy red. Hazel forced the deadliest of smiles, the smoothest voice, "Certainly, Mrs. Thaxton! I'd say the *service* is real pretty—and that you are *so* fortunate—in having someone who really knows to select your things for you!"

"Really, Mrs. El-li-ott! I—"

A feminine shriek came from outside, to the west. The men rushed out the doors nearest them. The women, expected to cower in maidenly helplessness, rushed after them. In the cold night, the light from house windows illuminated the crowd assembling in a puzzled circle about the summerhouse. In the open a hysterical young girl in dark red was trying to tell Marshall what had happened. He realized it was not easy, possibly a matter of choosing what to include and what to leave out:

It seemed she and—someone had come out for—for a breath of air. They had been *passing by* the summerhouse. It must have "looked like" they were going to enter—although they weren't—why should they? Then this strange—eerie, *awful* voice had come from nowhere. It had moaned very distinctly, "Go-o away! Little Teresa wants to

rest — go a-wa-ay!" As plainly as *that!* Laurine had screamed —

"I'll see about Little Teresa!" Bill Elliott brushed past the badly shaken Laurine and Marshall into summerhouse blackness. Others followed. (If only *they* hadn't — Bill would have come back after a moment, said whoever it was must have been playing a joke and run off.) Inside the gloomy place, the crowd centered on a panicky, shawled woman. She was pushed out in the light —

"Moira!" Marshall seemed ten feet tall and growing. She wanted only to sink down — down the cistern. "I have never been so — so humiliated in — "

"Mar-shall — don't be stupid!" Way had been cleared for Miss Milly, her black net trailing and catching on the splintery floor. "All this — it's just a little scheme of — *ours.*" She put a black-gloved arm around the trembling woman. "Moira, dear — you did beautifully. You see, ladies and gentleman, Moira is one of those devoted mothers who can't stay away from their babies long at a time but hate to be first to go — and you all know how Marshall never wants to leave!" Laughter not spontaneous, was still laughter. That was what was needed. "So I suggested this *one* time she come and look the party over — leave whenever she liked. It worked perfectly — almost, didn't it, my dear?"

"Yes — yes'm."

"See? And that about my Sister Teresa — how *did* you *ever* think of that — clever darling! But now — er — the excitement's over and if you'll quit goggling, my dears, stop chattering your teeth and get back inside — they're about to play the newest song, 'Tale of a Kangaroo' from *The Burgomaster.* Really, it's lovely — shoo!" She still stood by Moira, as the crowd with much noisy hilarity crowded back inside.

Only Marshall and the two women were left. The black-gloved arm fell away from the shawled figure, a little too hurriedly, perhaps. "Really — Moira! Really — !" *This* was the Miss Milly Moira knew — icy, distant.

"It was — fine of you, Milly, to — I don't know what we'd've done if you hadn't — "

"The debt isn't all on one side. If this *most welcome* interruption *hadn't* come, I honestly *don't* know what I might have said to — But never you mind! Moira's being here was *quite* fortunate — and possibly for another — er — person we'll *not* name *most* of all. And — er — now I'm afraid I can't put off any longer asking poor dear Trina to recite. Come on inside — *both* of you."

"No — no, thank you very much, Milly. I've — *we* have had our good time for this year. It was so — so nice of you to ask us. I'll see you to the door."

"Not necessary, Marshall — I see my husband has changed to shirt he can be *civil* in. I'll meet him. Good night and — thank you again, Moira — so very much."

"Good night, Miss Milly."

Moira slipped an arm humbly through one of his. They circled the summerhouse lilacs, walked rapidly through the side gate and down Palladium toward River Road.

"Moira, we should be very grateful to — Miss Milly. You should have thanked her — can write her a note tomorrow."

"Yes, Mister Lipscomb!" That was all she said. What she thought had already become part of an accumulation one day to become no longer bearable.

CHAPTER 6

IT IS SWEET of you to drop by, Jedediah." Miss Carietta was in gray-green silk, iridescent in firelight from white-walled library's grate fire. "I can tell you're on your way to your latest little *amour* — though 'little' is hardly the word. Do — sit."

Low-pitched laugh did not show his irritation. It was evoked by her customary tactics to learn what he was up to, the showmanship with which she staged them. This "little visit to your old Cousin Carietta" had been set at twilight, he was sure, so that ruddy glow of embers would make her look thirty instead of forty-three. She had lost no time.

Jed seated himself and made the first move. "You were posi*tiv*ely the belle of the ball last night — no, something *more*. What words *can* I use. Tell me!"

"Jed-e-diah Hadyn! How can I fulfil the role of a Dutch — er — Aunt when you pay me such — *blatant* compliments!" He *was* a sweet thing — too sweet, too dark, too handsome for his own good. "But all

the flattery in the world won't get you out of answering me, young man. You *are* on your way to Lanes'?"

"If I am, will I get a whuppin'?"

"*I* am not one to be influenced by those dark — er — Lotharian glances, Jedediah Hadyn! Keep them for the Lane girl, since your guilty manner has already given me answer. No — get back on the other sofa. I'm not one to be swayed by your 'sweet nearness,' either."

"Did anything *ever* sway you, Cousin Carietta?"

"T-t-t! You've got a talking-to coming, and you're going to get it."

He grinned and slid down on the opposite sofa until a waggled toe barely missed her hastily withdrawn one. "Can't I even ask how his royal highness, the heir-apparent, is before you start?"

"Charles is fine. I didn't dare tell him you were coming by, he'd have insisted on coming down to — "

"If *you* told him not to?"

"Jed! Listen to me. You know how I hate to correct *anyone*, but — Jed, no one expects a dashing young — er — scion such as yourself to act like — like the Reverend Proone" (she detested the Reverend Proone and *Mrs.* Proone). "But you owe *something* in the way of personal conduct to the family. To make that more plain, I need only refer to my Cousin Jeannine Cahoon!"

(Good God, thought Jed, Jeannine *again!*)

The greatest mystery in all the years of New Orleans Society, Miss Carietta persisted, had to do with the very first ball ever held by the Twelfth Night Revelers. The most sought-after honor that year for a girl was to be chosen its "Queen" by finding a golden bean in her slice of white-cake. One slice went to each of the *most* prominent belles of the city. Right there *at* the ball, mind you! *However* — during the serving of the cake slices, a *few* of the gentlemen present showed all too plainly they had been "imbibing" too freely. They displayed an unseemly loudness — even before they began *throwing* cake slices! Some of them at *less* popular girls! It had been disgraceful. Disgraceful! So much so that the chosen Queen *never* announced the finding of the bean! It was a crushing means of evidencing well-bred disapproval! "I need hardly tell you who the girl was, who forewent that *great* honor and — put first things *first!*"

Jed had heard this solution of what New Orleans still considered an unsolved mystery many times. This was the one time too many. "In New Orleans they say she was one of those that got hit by her slice of cake. Did Cousin Jeannine ever *show* anybody that gold bean?"

"Certainly not! Have you *no* — "

"Did she ever actually *tell* anybody she was the one who got it?"

"Didn't have to! Everyone *knew* she was the only *possible* choice.

Oh, the pride the family took in her — er — " She had seen the florid face, one gleaming eye cocked in quizzical disbelief. "You — make — me — *furious!* All right, I'll come *closer* home! Just how much disgrace do you think one member of our family has the right to heap upon it? How many — er — Mrs. Milt Temples and summerhouse rendezvous are *you* entitled to have mentioned — er — lewdly in the *same* breath with the Hadyn women — or have you forgotten the Hadyn *women?*"

"No — nor the Hadyn *men,* either!"

"You can't absolve yourself that way. Perhaps, it is true that some of them were — spirited."

"Name one male Puritan on the family tree and I'll be the second!"

"It isn't 'Puritan' to be reasonably — discreet. Your father and grandfathers before you — loved life. But *they* knew when to yield to — to — You, my boy, don't seem to. Have you thought what kind of example you'll be setting Nelia?"

"*That* isn't fair, Cousin Carietta."

"Hmmph! Suppose — just suppose when she grows up — (she can't *stay* a baby, although at times you seem to believe she can) some boy goes to her — with the intentions *you* have toward a certain large young girl tonight — attempts to — "

"I'll kill him! I mean — you're *wrong* about my — "

"But no — male relative should kill *you?*"

"I — believe we'd better — get to the point. *What* is it you've decided I must do?"

"You are devoted to Nelia, Jed — even if you have *unusual* ways of showing it." She turned the harpoon in his most vulnerable spot. "And you wouldn't want to do anything that would lay her open to liberties — as your sister? Have her blame *you,* Jedediah? But how can it be otherwise if you continue to do exactly as you please; break every rule of — decent society — use the family as a shield?"

"I haven't used anybody as a — "

"No? If you hadn't been a Hadyn, do you think — for just *one* example — Milt Temple would have laughed instead of — fired? Of course, *not.* Men like him shoot first and think later, if at all — under those conditions. Unless they know it means losing their jobs! Why, even if a Reardon County jury should free him after killing a Hadyn (she shuddered, and so did Jed), he'd be a marked man! *That's* what I mean — you have been using your family — and shamefully!"

"I — didn't mean to."

"No, Jed, — men like you never 'mean to' — but, unless someone takes you in hand, you go right ahead enjoying yourselves — and ruining things for everybody else! Can you deny a word of it? Don't you think it's about time you quit tearing the family down and *started*

amounting to something as we've all counted on, been so sure you would some day?"

"Trying to make me promise never to — to —"

"You know — deep in your heart — that I am trying to — help you. You're barely twenty years old — and, if all the reports are true, already have behind you more — er — affairs than most men of forty — even in Sironia!" The slight sniff did not escape him. "So far yours can be condoned, I suppose, as youthful — er — peccadilloes. They can't be much longer. Do you want to be like a certain cousin of yours in Memphis — or don't you know about his sordid —"

"I've heard *all* about him. No, I *don't* want to be like that. Is it true that — *that's* all he ever thinks about? And his wife works *in an office?*"

"Oh, it's true enough — and yet," she wasn't going to let the chance slip, "there are those who blame me for not letting his mother cart away the Reardon Mahogany! You do have *some* family feeling, I'm glad to see."

"I've got it all right. Sometimes — like when you said some fellow might — some day — attempt something with Nelia, I realized that maybe I've got *too much* —"

"Hardly, my dear!" He was coming around just as she'd planned, and in even less time. "Just one suggestion — wouldn't think of making you late for your engagement! If ever a man needed to get *properly* married and settle down, it is — *you*."

"I know it. I've got almost to popping the fatal question *lots* of times — but every time, the next morning I'm so damn — I mean I'm so glad I didn't, I whistle all day! It's just — the way I am — not the way I want to be. I like girls and I want them to like me — but before I know it they've let me do things they oughtn't've. Even then I can't see why other people should — mind. I don't *want* to be that — I want people to judge me like they do everybody else."

"How *can* they?" In all sincerity. "Don't ever forget that, Jed."

"With you around, Cousin Carietta?"

"That — isn't — respectful."

"I'm sorry. But you're so — so sure of our 'divine right' — you and Aunt Milly! *I'm* not sure of *any*thing."

"You will be."

"That — that's what I'm afraid of. Guess the older I get the more I'll put what-I-was-*born* ahead of what-I-am. I mean — oh, I don't know!"

"That is the most *sensible* thing you've said. *You're* too young to know yet, need someone to tell you."

He threw up his hands, and flopped heavily back to the sofa. "All right — you tell me, Cousin —"

"I already have. Jed, you must get married — and to a suitable girl."

"*And* live happily ever after! You have her picked out — need I ask?"

She remained quiet a moment, studying intently the diamond solitaire of her engagement ring. "I'll overlook the tone you used. Are you *asking* me to suggest some one?"

"I — don't know. I mean I believe I already know someone — that is, if it *is* necessary." Flippancy merged into boyish concern. "And I guess it is."

"You mean the Lane girl, I presume."

His guilty start was ample confirmation, though he did not realize it. "Why do you think that?"

"Why, indeed!" She threw her lovely bronze-brown head back. The slender throat (not nearly so baggy as Milly Thaxton's) was a clear, straight line in the firelight that had grown so bright as to make the candles unnecessary. "*I* saw you sneak — yes 'sneak,' Jedediah — away from Trina during that disgraceful scene around your Aunt Millicent's new porcelain!"

"Well, I'd had her for four dances, and there wasn't a name on her program and — "

"And you caught the eye of someone who wanted to 'get a breath of air' as much as you did?"

"Cousin Carietta, in the nicest possible words you are saying something *very* — nasty."

"Untrue?"

"Certainly." He humped up angrily. "I'm late now. Thanks for offering to — "

"Before you go, Jedediah, get *one* thing straight. The Lanes are respectable people. *You'd* better think twice before you marry a girl who would leave the house at a formal affair with *any* man. Need I elaborate?"

"Yes, ma'am! A perfectly nice girl just happens to go out in the yard for a few minutes with a — "

"With a boy *like Jed Hadyn!*"

"Umm! Do you mean a Hadyn can't afford to consider seriously a girl who will — ahem! ahem! — with a fellow like me!"

"*Now* you're — obscene!" She was more discomposed than he had ever seen her, which was not very much. "Go, *go* to your Laurine Lane — but remember this: a girl who will let you take liberties with her before marriage will probably be very — complacent about them from others — afterward!"

"*You're* making me think — the *worst* of *every* girl I ever had a date with!"

"Haven't the *kind* of girls you ask for dates—had *any*thing to do with it?"

"Damn! I—excuse me. Yes, I like girls with some life in them, that know *how* to laugh, at least. First thing I know, you'll be suggesting I go ahead and marry—" he stopped to think of the most far-fetched case he could, "that nonpareil among lovely women, that bottle of skimmed milk—your next-door neighbor!"

"That's *exactly* who I'm suggesting!"

"What—! Oh, my God! Cousin Carietta, I—Trina and me? Oh, my—O-ho-ho!" He curled up on the sofa like a ten-year-old to howl, could barely hear her stiff rejoinder.

"You had better go—and *not* come back until you can discuss serious matters—seriously."

Here was what he'd been waiting for. He grabbed his hat, actually ran from the house. Against one of the big porch columns he stopped to steady flat belly-spasms. Trina—good God! Trina! Instantly all mirth vanished—evaporated: Had Cousin Carietta really set that solid bronze head of hers on *this?*

Miss Milly sat beside the hearth in her own room on what should have been the most contented evening of her year. She "loved" this after-the-storm calmness. There were security and comfort in her own mahogany, her own gray walls and sheer white draperies. Even severely plain white marble which framed the grate was soothing, patrician, reassuring. That was the way she wanted life to be—Doric!

Calvin would be up any minute. Then they could really talk about last night. She had been doing so all day, of course, with women; but their comments were mostly aimed at displaying manners and getting invited back next year. Her Calvin would say what he thought.

Ten years ago—even five or four, perhaps—she would have had Hazel Bly Elliott first on tonight's agenda. (Everyone had seen the "Bly" come out, realized the impossibility of trying to mix oil and water.) But no, not *tonight:* there was too much that was agreeable, to—

"Sorry you didn't get down this morning before I left." Calvin had entered without knocking. "And sorry I couldn't get home for lunch or dinner, but our oil investment is really coming to life." He reached into an inside pocket, reconsidered, looked about to cover his indecision. "What is this—thing?"

"A tête-à-tête chair." She changed to it. "I face this way and, you face that way. Lipscomb's sent it out today—on trial. Like it?"

"What *won't* they get out next?" He took the other seat, and held

her briefly in his arms as she leaned over the S-shaped arm between them. His kiss was quite gentle, quite tender — placating. "Hmm — wearing the white mother-hubbard I like best."

"Negligée! And, please, Calvin, don't quote Bill Elliott and call it a 'naked-as-a-jay' ever again!"

"I was wondering, coming up the stairs, how — " slowly he unbuttoned the two bottom buttons of gray vest, then the waistband catch of mottled gray trousers. "how the Elliotts would be got into the conversation. I *do* appreciate your inviting — "

"You should! But — there! I'd just determined I'd *not* mention them. Carietta says — "

"You and Carietta! I've laughed off and on all day about the War of the Paper Roses. She gave me *her* version last night. *Two* of the best stories I've heard!"

"Very funny, I *must* say! Not so many years ago I'd have sent those yellow things packing right back to the attic. But yesterday somehow, it didn't seem worth the — effort."

"And about time! Anyway, everybody knows you have *three* colors of paper flowers up yonder. *Which* you use is not a matter of life and death — any longer."

She held a strong white hand in both of hers, examined its large nails carefully. "You are suggesting that the store I lay by — preserving what we have for — *him* is no longer important?" She had swayed across the chair arm, was sobbing into the opened palm of his hand. Her misinterpretation of his innocent joke was so clear he made no attempt to correct it, no attempt to stop her tears. Milly needed these little breakdowns she allowed herself only when alone or with him. Soon the bitterest part would pass, and they could talk. In the large, brightly gaslit room, there was no sound save that of shifting coals and the low, subsiding gasps in his hand.

Suddenly the room seemed lighter. "That did h-help me, Calvin."

"Me, too. At times like this, I borrow from the Presbyterians, am sure everything is predestined, and, therefore — right. It was best that *we* be together — even that Marshall and Moira should — " he waited the long moment until she nodded, " — and best that Launcelot be just as he is!"

Abruptly she stiffened, defensively. "Yes, Calvin, oh, yes! But why do so many *want* to misunderstand? What can he expect — from them — when you and I are — aren't with him any — " Again she had gone noiselessly to pieces.

"Whoa, now!" He was trying none too successfully to be very much amused. "That *is* gazing into the future!"

"We — we *must*. It was — all right when he was younger for him to play with Gamaliel and the other little niggras. But now that it

must be stopped, he'll have to have *something* — *some* companionship. Can't *we* give it to him?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear. Cousin Nathalia — never having had any children and, *therefore,* an authority on the subject — once told me that the greatest parental fallacy of all is thinking they can meet their adolescent children on a *friendly* footing."

"So she's told almost every — Have you told Launcelot about — *things?*"

"Yes — and no." He felt her recognition of his own stifled exasperation. "I meant to tell you. I took the afternoon off today — to go fishing with him — up on North Fork."

"Why wasn't I — ? Never mind. How did he — ? I hope you didn't — weren't too hurried about it. It *can* be a great shock to an innocent — "

"As I seem to remember!"

"Calvin — I was *just* a child! What — did our boy say when — *after* you were through — ?"

"He said — 'It's nice — isn't it, Father?' "

"Calvin, he didn't! It — it was just that you took him by surprise. He felt he had to say — *something.*"

"No-o. I got the unmistakable impression that he already knew everything I'd just sweated my heart out telling him and — *does* think it's nice."

"Who would dare — ?"

"Gum — for one."

"But I told Melissa — years ago — to lay the law down to Gamaliel never under *any* circumstances to mention — "

"I don't think there's any 'law,' my dear, which would — restrain boys — black *or* white — on that subject."

"But why, Calvin, why — why didn't you — *earlier,* Ca-alvin?"

"For the same reason most fathers had rather — break an arm than tell their own sons how they got here."

"But this is — terrible! He'll have niggra ideas about the — holiest — "

"Are theirs so very different?"

"Calvin!" She drew away with all the dignity evoked by a jest in the worst possible taste. "I wouldn't be able to say — Calvin, *that* settles it!"

"Settles what?" His sigh as she went out into the upstairs hallway recognized that what should have been a most pleasant night had by-passed all such possibilities.

Hallway cold came breathing in with "Launcelot, honey! *Laun-ce-lot?*"

A rectangle of light appeared directly across the hall revealing slim

tallness Thaxton-erect. "Come — come over in Mother's room a minute, honey. Turn down your lamp a little. *Tha-at's* it! Now close your door, dear, so your room will keep nice and warm. Tha-at's right!" Linking her two hands inside one of his arms and guiding him, she closed her door with a small white pompom'd foot. His ruffled shirt of the night before, open at the throat, showed between lapels of Burgundy red dressing gown. To her he was "Byronic" — no, something far better than that, the Thaxton nose was so much more distinctive than Lord Byron's. "Father and Mother are just spending a pleasant evening talking — and need you to make everything complete." A youth's face glowed with a boy's happiness.

She took her same seat in the S-chair almost facing Calvin, and motioned Lance toward a rose-embroidered sofa-pillow cushion on the floor at her feet. Leaning against her knee, looking into luminous red coals, he still sat as he had as a child. At times like this, Milly and Calvin were almost glad.

"I had a *big* one on my line today. It *was* today, wasn't it —?"

"Yes, dear. He got away?"

"Sure did — if he *was* there. Father said my hook got caught on a log. And I — think maybe it did, but it's so much more fun *thinking* it was a big bass — this long — no, *this* — "

"You're right, son."

"But, Launcelot, dear — wasn't it more *disappointing* — to think you had caught something and find you hadn't — than never to have thought you had?"

The wide, youthful brow wrinkled as it had over elementary arithmetic (before it had been abandoned permanently. Reading and Writing, yes. Arithmetic, no). "Then — I wouldn't have had any fun!"

Calvin laughed, half amusedly, half admiringly. "He certainly answered you, Milly."

She flushed delightedly, used affectionate, babying address of old: "Him knows what's best." Delicate white fingers combed fondly long, silken brown strands, then drew them back to define their left-side parting. She wanted to continue, knew that Calvin wanted her to and that Launcelot would soon become drowsy, that before long the magnificent head would sink to her lap and the three of them would be happy — as happy as ever they could be. Why — then — *must* she speak out? Why couldn't she take this happiness, such as it was, without — but she had asked herself that before, many times before. And each time, no matter how long it took, the answer had been the same: When something had to be said she *had* to say it, had to say it without delay.

"Have a good time last night, honey? You know — at *our* party?"

"Oh, *yes!* Gum and I slipped down to Palladium Av-ee-new, and tied an old kettle to — one of the carriages. And when it drove off — it began rattling and the horses reared up on their hind legs and — we almost busted — "

" 'Bursted' — dear," automatically and in quick suspicion. "Mother meant did you have a good time here in our — *whose* carriage, did you say, dear?"

"I — I didn't say — did I, Fa-ather?"

"No, son — But I know which I *hope* it — "

"Calvin! Mother wants — Mother and Father want you to have pleasure. But don't you think you are getting too big to play such jokes?"

He looked up. Huge dark eyes were full of hurt tears. "Oh, Mo-other, if I have to stop having fun and act — the way *you all* did last night, I — I'd rather be — "

"Never mind, dear!" She kissed a long lock of hair back in place, remained bending over. "Whose carriage was it? Tell Mother."

"Cousin Carietta's!"

"Hoo-ray!"

"*Cal*vin! Launcelot, honey, it might have caused an accident. You wouldn't want Cousin Carietta to get *hurt*."

"Yes, I would."

"Why, Launcelot! Calvin, such conduct on your part is no help! Mother's little — Mother wants you to be kind to everybody. *Not* wish *any*body harm. *Why* don't you like your Cousin Carietta? She loves *you* — "

"She's too — sweet! Gum says every time Cousin Carietta has been here it takes Poppy two days to get the mo-lasses coating off the furniture. What're you shaking for, Mo-other?"

"Milly, 'such conduct on *your* part is no help'!"

"Hush — *both* of you! Launcelot, don't do anything which might injure anyone — *ever* again! What I started to ask you was *which* of all the beautiful young girls here last night did you like *best?*"

"The boy should get back to his — get to bed early tonight. He was up so — "

"No, Calvin. Tell Mo-other —"

"Not any of them. They all acted like I was in the way — except Trina. And Trina's not pretty at all."

"Now, dear! You left before the dances you had with Laurine Lane came. She was *so* disappointed. She told me so. That wasn't very po — "

"When I went to the first one you put on my program Laurine said she had made a mistake, had put me down for another dance that was on my program with somebody else. She said she was sorry — but I — I don't think she was. I know I wasn't."

"*Did* you and—" the soft lips went to their decisive straight line, "—she dance later?"

"No'm. She said *later* she'd been in the dressing room with a headache—only, she was outside with Cousin Jed."

"Why the common little—! You think *she's* pretty, don't you, dear?"

"Oh, yes. I like tall girls."

"That answers Mother's question *nicely*. Your father thinks you had better get a good night's sleep." She tilted his head back and kissed the classic forehead softly, lingeringly. He rose quickly, patted his father on the back and left as if fearful he might be called back. "Close the door, dear. And close yours." He did so.

"Calvin—do you think Jed has—honorable intentions toward the Lane girl?"

"Be a fool not to! She's beautiful and lively and—"

"Maybe, it's *your* intentions I should be inquiring into."

"I wish you would—just once. Reckon you *could* worry about me—that way?"

"Frankly, no." She laid a tender hand on his arm. "Jed could make that girl—pretty miserable—"

"And pretty happy, too, I'd say. What does it mean, your sudden interest in Laurine?"

"Mean? You *know* how I hate to see *any* young girl made a fool of—especially if she has to live here in Sironia afterward."

"Jed's intentions could be *honorable*, I suppose."

A look almost of anger spread from her eyes, firmed little chin even more. "No, they couldn't."

"Why in the world should *you* care? It's not what I think—is it?"

"Stop it, Calvin." She added hurriedly, "That clerk of Bill Elliott's came with all those papers for me to sign this morning when I was so sleepy I couldn't tell one from the other."

"So—he said."

She noted his smile. It was, well, too *twisty* to suit her. "Said—what?"

"Told Bill, who told me."

"I can imagine! You men gossip *worse* than—And what did I do that was so—engrossing, may I ask?"

"Kept him waiting in the library for half an hour, then made an overwhelming, beruffled entrance. Very nervous, not much more than a boy, he asked 'Are *you* Mrs. Thaxton?' At that, you froze him! Did it with your little lorgnette. Then you said, 'You *really* don't know who I am?' and when he stammered he wasn't sure, you said—'*You* must be a fool!'"

"Well he was! Fancy anyone living in Sironia not—"

"Not knowing you!"

"Stop, Calvin, I — won't have it! I'm not going to be scolded by you or anyone else for putting a little lumber-yard whippersnapper in his place. He knew perfectly well who I — "

"Why — did you do it, Milly? You aren't like that. I know it, and everybody who knows you knows it. But that boy doesn't. Why do you have to do — *say* such things? I want people to know you like I do, to understand that when you get on your high horse, it isn't you but — What *is* it? *Why* do you?"

"I — I don't know, Calvin. Partly temper, partly in defense of all I want *us* to stand for, I guess. Not much of a reason, I'm — "

"There's a lot of whatever-it-is in all of *us*. Sometimes it's pretty fine." He had her nearest inside-wrist to his lips. His voice came to her as if through her pulse. "But when it crops out like *that* it isn't fine at all."

She had been hurt and sullen by turns. "I suppose I should apologize to the little whip — "

"I wouldn't ask you to. *But* — I can can see that the same boy brings out something for you to look over *tomorrow*. Can I count on you to wipe out his — first impression?"

"Yes."

"And be glad of the chance?"

"Oh, I suppose so — yes!"

"That's *my* Milly. And you are going to be rewarded well this side of Heaven. When these oil wells we are drilling start coming in — those were leases you signed this morning, in case you haven't figured them out — I'm going to buy you — wait and see."

"And if the wells — *don't* come in?"

"We'll take our loss as Bill says, and grin. He's already been poor once and — I don't *ever* want to be. Which means we're taking no big chances. We've put in no more than we can *afford* to lose. I'd be better satisfied though, if we hadn't endorsed so much paper for Jalloux — even though it is only a matter of form."

"If he's related to the Louisiana Jalloux', he should be rolling in — "

"No connection. In fact, I doubt if his name *is* Jalloux. Bill knew him with the circus. He handled all the money then. Bill'd trust him with his last dollar — "

"Well, don't *you!*"

"Never fear. It's a pleasure being with a man so well informed. He knows what he's talking about, has made a closer study of the formations around Beaumont than anybody — except Higgins, of course. The men behind him are rich *and* conservative, don't fool with wildcatting — "

"I am sure you know what you are doing, Calvin — but the one look *I* had at Mister Jalloux convinced me he has niggra blood in his veins — "

Explosive mirth cut her short. "You *always* say that about everybody with dark skin. Not that living in Sironia doesn't make one suspicious. What if Old Jalloux *has,* so long as the investment pays — ?"

"Don't *say* such things — even in fun! The very thought of — such a taint makes me — actually sick. The colored race is fine in many ways — could show some of us a few things in loyalty, I expect. However, when bloods mix — but we'll not speak of it."

"I know how you feel, my dear — but it was you who did speak of it. Did the *Sentinel* get you — about the write-up for the Sunday issue?"

"Yes. As usual Mister Hone sent me his proof to — go over. It's going to say that I showed 'the poise of an empress.' "

"Wha-at? Wait a minute!" He got the last issue of the paper from a table near her bed and pointed to an advertisement on its front page: "ERECT-FORM CORSETS. No pressure on bust or abdomen. Greatest triumph of the age" and in smaller print, "Gives poise of an empress."

"Oh! Calvin, this is — perfectly awful. And Miss Susie has already turned it in. I do believe she did this on purpose! You'll *have* to stop it — first thing in the morning."

"All right, but — " Why was he looking at her so steadily? "You'll owe me for it."

"Owe you? If we're going to 'keep books,' there're a few debts against you. However — let's talk about last night. There are always things I simply can't *afford* to say to anyone else. We'll begin with the engraving of the invitations. *Everyone* liked this year's script — "

"Hold on a minute. I just happened to remember," said *not* very convincingly. He drew a heavy, white envelope from an inside pocket. "This came by a sort of special delivery — Bill himself handed it to me this afternoon at the bank. The others won't be delivered until tomorrow."

She took the proffered envelope. It was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Reardon Thaxton, Mr. Launcelot Reardon Thaxton, Thaxton Hill. She stiffened, Jed would have said "congealed," coughed lightly to cover premonitory throat-stricture. It had been opened. She drew out the heavy folder, catching the embossing on the inner rim — hmm, her own Kansas City printer — *and* script! Soft, practiced fingers opened the folder, held it far enough to be read without her glasses.

Mr. and Mrs. William Fitzmaurice Elliott
request the pleasure of your presence
1100 Main Avenue
the first Friday in December of 1900
R.S.V.P. 8.30 p.m. Dancing

Now it had been lowered, the ball of a little finger sliding almost unconsciously over the lettering. What heavy engraving. "The *first* Friday," indeed! She started to speak angrily, but waited until she would reveal absolutely no feeling. "And *where* did the 'Fitzmaurice' come from?"

Calvin had been watching her. Magnificent Thaxton nose drawn at the nostrils relaxed a little. "I asked Bill the same thing, and he said, 'Damn if I know.'"

"Calvin! It isn't necessary to quote your friends — *literally! This* — after all I went through last night! Do you know what *all* our friends are saying about the way your Elliotts — "

"No, my dear, and I don't care. In this day honesty and respectability are what count — not who Bill's great-grandparents were."

"That's all very — *very* familiar. If you choose to discard family — values, do so, by *all* means! But don't expect *me* to — "

"Milly, to be as sweet and lovely and genuinely kind as you are, you can be the most exasperatingly wrong — "

"This is *yours,* I believe." She handed him the invitation, which he tore in two and threw toward the fire. The pieces fell on white marble hearth. "And what threat will you use this time to shame me into — ?"

"No forcing. Merely asking."

"How — thoughtful, how *very* — "

"Milly — please — let's forget this *now.* Let's have an hour of our *own,* without *any* of these other things — that have come up tonight, one after the other to — "

"'Come'? I thought they were *dragged* in."

"All right — 'dragged in.' But let's talk about — last night. I can't wait to hear whose dress was made over and who slipped two whole slices of cake in her bag to take home and — "

"Please — I am not at all — well. Good night — "

"All right a minute ago!"

"It's here," she put her hand over her heart, "that you have hurt me."

"For God's sake — !"

"Please do your cursing elsewhere — "

"All — right!" Calvin Reardon Thaxton, President of the Sironia National Bank, the man to whom others came to regain calm and reassurance, strode from his beloved wife's room and slammed the door behind him.

Jed and Laurine under the chain-hung center lamp of the Lane's small parlor were shaking a pasteboard dice cup, moving small colored disks on colored "board," and — waiting. From under heavy

brows, Jed's eyes were suggesting moves nowhere found in the *National Rules for Parcheesi*. Birdlike Nanette who had been vivaciously entertaining them for an hour or more with the social life of Sironia twenty years before was gathering up the half-empty glasses of hot, spiced lemonade, the raisin-cookie plate and the scarcely rumpled, drawn-work napkins. Not a mark or deep wrinkle on them! Should she just press them without washing? "Well, I guess that's everything. One crumb left and the ants move in on us!" She sank her dimples deep. "Well, I'll get these — and myself! — out of the way!"

"I'll take them, Mother," said Laurine without moving her eyes from the dice Jed was throwing for his move. Mother was certainly showing her good side tonight.

"Don't go, Mrs. Lane." Jed didn't look up either. "The good old days were getting really good. How about the parts you left out?"

"Naughty, naughty! No, dear! It won't take me a minute. My Laurine's always wanting to do more than her share of *any* work, Jed. A girl should enjoy herself while she's young — I know I did! I remember at Milly Thaxton's wedding I was in the throes of trying to decide between your father, Laurine, and — at least two others, one of whom, I might say, is *very* prominent now. But your father — he was so wasteful — *then* — cut the traces of — the others' harness so he could get me off to — "

"Mother! You're tipping the tray."

"So I am. I always say if you try to do two things at once, you'll end up doing neither! I'll leave you in suspense about the harness — like *The Saturday Evening Post* does — "

Their absorption in parcheesi waned as she left the room. Negligently she left the hall door ajar. Jed looked up and smiled. Laurine looked down and smiled. "Did I tell you I reserved seats for us for Frederick Ward in *The Duke's Jester* in January?"

He had, but she understood this was for eavesdropping consumption. "Oh, Jed! I just love him — in every show I've seen him in. You know what? He reminds me a little of Mister Marshall Lip — Oh, the draught from the hall. It's co-old!"

"Er — yes. I'd better close the door."

"I'd rather — " She rose and called out into the hall. "Mother — trying to freeze Jed out, leaving the door open this way?" She closed it on silvery laughter, peal after peal, from quite near. She came back in, pressing black-figured, dark green foulard smoothly down over handsomely encased figure. "Is it my — time, Jed?"

"No — *my* time!"

She pretended not to understand. She could actually feel those eyes creeping from her curly black hair, down past her face, measuring her

generous bosom, narrow-corseted waist and full hips. It had stopped there, was making her feel perfectly awful. But she liked it. The best-looking girl in town, Laurine saw no reason to pretend otherwise — certainly not with a boy like Jed. If only poor Miss Moira hadn't been skulking around the summerhouse — not that Laurine would have let Jed Hadyn go as far as talk said he *always* tried to. Just looking at him made her feel bad — no, good. But it was *time* he learned there was at least one girl who didn't jump when he said to.

"Jed — you said it was your time."

"You know what? All of a sudden I'm not as intensely interested in parcheesi as I *was*. Want to know why?" He moved over on the lumpy walnut sofa upholstered in dark plum plush. "Come sit over here where it's more — comfortable and I'll tell you all about it."

"I'm perfectly comfortable here, thank you. It was nice of you to bring Father and Mother home with us last night. Did you have a good time?"

"I *almost* did!"

"Too bad you didn't take a girl you enjoy being with *completely*."

"You know that's not what I meant."

"It isn't? Well, what *did* you? Mean, I mean?"

"We're both a little mixed up."

She saw him still staring at her green and black foulard thighs. If he didn't stop, she'd call Mother — no, that would be too — too childish. Besides, Mother was only too eager to get back in here.

"Come on over on the pretty sofa — su-u-ugar."

"No. And my name's not — *that*."

"It is *now* — Su-u-ugar."

His voice was not only weighing, as his eyes had, but was stirring her — inside. It was so deep, that voice, its huskiness seemed to grate at first, until a girl suddenly found it the most soothing and at the *same* time most disturbing sound she'd ever heard. She wouldn't sit by *him* for a million dollars! And she wasn't going to have any more dates alone with him, either. "Su-u-ugar, know what?"

"Stop it, Jed Hadyn!" Sure of herself.

She was so sure that it was impossible to understand how it was that in less than a half-hour she *was* beside him on "the pretty sofa." He'd insisted so much, and after all this was her own home and, after all, a girl had to be polite. And this definitely *was* the *last* time she was going to see *him* — except at parties and, maybe, for a soda at the drugstore — or —

He had stopped that whispery "Su-u-ugar," had one hand in his. She could take it away easily, but that would be prudish. After all, he was her guest and — She did try to push from close beside him. There was no strength in her knees. He had raised her hand, and in its palm

was burying his lips. She could feel their slight working, by their warm breath tell what they were saying.

"Jed — don't be silly!"

He kissed the limp hand — once — twice — again. She was losing count. "Is *this* — " his firm thigh had shifted against her own, was pressing like neither had a frazzling thing on, " — being silly?"

"It — it certainly *is!* No, Jed, *no!* Honestly, I mean it, do-on't — please — " Still holding her hand he had leaned over and with his other arm had grown *all* around her. He didn't smell like Claude — smelled inviting. Those same firm lips all the girls talked about were on her cheek — just about on her own now. She could turn her face away — she was sure she could if she'd try — but — not yet. Their lips were together, not just together but part of each other, his were forcing, no, not forcing, asking hers to open — just a little. His arms were around her and the wide chest that all the girls wanted so much to touch was moving side to side, pressing. This *wasn't* nice. Foulard wrinkled so. She must do something — in a hurry. What? She didn't want to do anything — not just for a minute. But a girl just couldn't give Jed Hadyn an *inch*. Everybody knew that. If she slapped him — like a few girls had — she knew he'd leave and never come back. Oh, dear! He was holding her helpless just with his lips. Her hands were entirely free — both of them — and not doing a thing! She'd never been so ashamed or so — so — so — What *was* the matter?

He had slid away, jumped to his feet between her and the door and was studying the parcheesi board when her mother entered. "Who's winning?"

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at this game, Mrs. Lane." Jed's voice was deeper than ever and oh, so — thrilling! "I take so long to try to figure out what to do next she gets disgusted with me — see, she's left the table!"

"Why, daughter! She *is* a good player — has even made up some new rules to make the game harder — interested in things — er — intellectual, not just romancing, like most girls her — "

"Mother, don't say such things." Smoothed out, Laurine emerged from Jed's shadow. "Sironia has the loveliest girls *any*place."

"Hmm-mph! With their parents letting them do any old way? One thing sure, *my* daughter behaves herself like a lady or she knows what her father'll do!"

"Why, Mrs. Lane, you don't mean he'd put Laurine out in a snowstorm — just for having a little — fun?"

"There's fun like — like parcheesi, and there's what's *called* fun — for a while! That kind — there's no such thing as a little of — like garlic! I'm sure *you* understand how to treat a nice girl."

"Mo-o-th — !"

"Why, I think so, Mrs. Lane. And I think you are entirely right — yes, ma'am, you and Mr. Lane have sure got the right idea. I — I don't believe Laurine knows what a *fine* father and mother she's got."

"Sometimes," a little too promptly, "I wonder, myself. We — we try to do our best. You all go on with your game. It won't be eleven for another half-hour. That's why I came back. Laurine told you about saying good night *at eleven*, didn't she?"

"Yes — yes, *ma'am*. And I can see *your* good judgment in that, *too*."

"That's because you've been raised right, even if — never mind. I do hope you'll come back to see us — sometime *real* soon."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lane — and you can be sure of that."

The door swung closed. They sank to the sofa as one, side by side. If Mother had waited another second, Laurine might have grabbed Jed, anyway. Without breaking their kiss, he turned his body to the right toward her, lifted her gently up over his bent right knee, and then pressed her more firmly to him as he leaned back against the arm of the sofa and locked his feet about her knees. She tried to break free, but not nearly as strongly as she could have. One of his hands gliding over her shoulder had unhooked something. Something else was slipping and sliding forward and down. His hand had found what it sought, was cupped, tender and constantly shifting — and still their kiss had not been broken. His other hand was moving *down* — slowly, pausing, then moving again, now lifting green skirt hem — "What the — !"

From somewhere had come the impulse Laurine had both sought and avoided. She twisted loose. The neck of her dress caught on his ring and ripped a little. He followed her across the sofa. "No, Jed. No!" She was on her feet, hurriedly setting the black pompadour and the green folds to rights again. He did not rise, sat looking steadily at her like a young tiger that knew it wasn't necessary to pounce. "You'd better leave now, Jed. I thought — hoped you knew when to — stop. After this, you go with the girls that want that kind of — "

"Haven't I stopped?"

"You certainly have! Good gracious, Jed Hadyn, do you — " Before a mirror she was making much of repairs no longer necessary, wanting to get on another subject, but liking this one too much, "— act like this with *every* girl you go to see?"

"You know I don't. You're the only one I'll ever feel — this way about — again, su-u-ugar!"

"Don't call me that. It makes me — I don't know what! Are you going home or going to bee-have?"

"Oh, I'm getting a choice now!" He spread his heavy legs wide, knew how informatively it stretched his pants as he lay back on the

sofa, looking at her that same way. She couldn't stand this much longer. "But suppose I don't want to go home and — don't want to 'bee-have,' *either?*"

"In that case Mother will be glad to come back in and we can play three-handed whist — "

"Oogh! I'll *bee*-have."

"Promise?"

"For the time being."

"Well — " She hated her own tittery laugh. "I guess that's the best a girl can expect from Jed Hadyn." She seated herself in one of the parcheesi chairs under the center lamp and tried to conceal the unhappy triumph in her quivering smile at having been the first girl to stop Jed Hadyn without calling out the Fire Department. Wait until certain girls she could name heard about this! But she'd have to keep talking or the devil'd move in again! "Did I tell you my trophy-door is full? When I hung the Thaxton program and favors on it this morning I had to put them *on top* of some others. 'Dust-catchers,' Mother calls them. They make an awful racket when the wind blows. It's — scary — in the middle of the night to hear them rustling. I don't like to hear — "

"What *do* you like in the middle of the night — besides me?"

"Sleep!" She began fingering her hair. Raised arms drew her breasts high, showed off the best figure in Reardon County. Not that she wanted to get his mind back on such as that — if, indeed, Jed Hadyn's mind was ever off! "I just love to go over all the things on my trophy-door and remember the good times I had."

"Oh, dear — dear — dear! How cap-ti-vating. I must start *me* a trophy-door." He didn't stop looking down at her while he made fun of her. "What should I put on my very own trophy-door — su-u-ugar?"

"I'd hate to tell you!"

He ducked behind upflung arms in unconditional surrender to blinding wit. She was delighted with herself and him. Right then there wasn't anything in the world she wasn't delighted with.

"All right, kiddo, you win!" He announced like a referee. "What'll we talk about now — oh, yes, I was just getting warmed up on trophy-doors when you took advantage of — "

"Oh, Jed — who do you think stopped me — on Main this afternoon? Called me over to her carriage and kept me standing on the curb talking for ten — fifteen minutes, anyway?"

"Cousin Carietta?"

"Not quite. Miss Milly!" Laurine went off into a delighted giggle, decided to keep up the suspense shown in his lunge forward, elbows resting on knees. "I could just feel my social standing with passers-by going up by leaps and bounds as we passed the time of day."

"Cousin Milly doesn't hail people just to pass the time of day. What'd she *want?*"

"From *me?* What could she? We talked about lots of things — such as 'some of our young men' not showing the right respect for young girls these days. No names were mentioned. Didn't have to be!"

"Why, the old — !"

"S-sh! She was just doing her duty — said as much. I appreciated it — being the sweet, trusting kind, myself."

"Ye-es, you *are!*"

"Why, Jed Hadyn! If you mean by that what I think you do, you can go home this very minute and not ever — "

"Pipe down. I don't think *anything!* What else did she say?"

Laurine almost giggled, but choked it back just in time. She fanned with a hand to account for her red face. "Somehow — like I said — the talk swung around to 'the young men of the present generation and their mistaken ideas,' then to 'Thank heaven, my Launcelot is a *gentleman!*"

"He *might* be your best chance at getting this respect you're always — "

"You say the meanest things. That wasn't what she meant!"

He shrugged. "Maybe not, but I bet she got a compliment for Old Lance out of you somehow — to repeat to him. Gives him self-confidence, she says."

"There are lots of nice things to be said — about *him!* She's done it with other girls here — same as throwing sweet old Lance and me at each other right there on Main. I felt like busting out crying for her sake!"

"Hope you didn't make her mad."

"I'm sure I didn't. I made it plain I'm 'a young thing' and cannot leave my mother. But I got so rattled that by the time I escaped I hadn't the smidgin of an idea what I'd come to town for. I started for home, blinking the tears back — and what do you think?"

"Tell me what you did and *then* I'll think."

She appraised him doubtfully. It wasn't very flattering to have him forget — all that other — so completely. It was just as if it had never happened at all. He really hadn't meant it — *was* like they said he was! Well, she certainly hadn't let Mister Jed Hadyn get away with — much. "I passed a new man in front of the Bank. Real good-looking he was and dressed fit to kill, like most traveling men — "

"How'd you know he *was* a traveling man?"

"Why — he was carrying a big sample-case — I think."

"They don't carry their cases store-to-store any more. They open them up in what used to be the hotel's old dining room."

"Smarty! He *told* me he was a traveling man — after he'd stopped me to ask where Lipscomb's was."

"Right across the street — with the name plastered all over it?"

"Oh, well! The truth, if you must know, is that he'd mistaken my eye-blinking for — something else." Jed reached for her hand but she was too quick. So — he *hadn't* forgotten! "*Ted's* real refined — was just lonesome, that's all."

"Reckon if I flattened *Ted's* nose it would keep him from getting lonesome?"

"No! Such a handsome nose! And *he* doesn't try to — pree-sume on a girl's good nature!"

"What'd you expect on Main Street?"

"Just what I expect in my own home — gentlemanly conduct and refined — "

"Guess I'll have to get me an old suitcase and start 'accosting strange girls.'"

"*You* don't need any suitcase."

"Su-u-ugar! Where'd you and *dear* old Ted go — for a soda? To the Globe?"

"You saw us! Jed Hadyn, you're *guessing!*"

"Not *now!*" He reached over and grabbed her in his arms, crushed her so tight she couldn't have screamed very loud, even if she had wanted to. She was being kissed heavily, roughly and before she knew it was returning kiss for kiss, pressure for pressure, sometimes oftener.

He recognized the first tremor which shook her and began time-proven moves.

"Please, please, Ted — I mean, Jed!"

"So-o — *that's* how it was."

"It was *not*. You *got* to believe that, Jed — "

"Laurine! Lau-rine!" from the rear of the house, "it's eleven o'clock — darling!"

She broke from his arms, dragging him to the hall door by one hand. "Yes, Mother. Jed's *just* going — " With her other hand she snatched his hat and coat, shoved them at him and out the front door. She mustn't let herself look in his eyes, feeling this way. "Good night, Jed!"

"Well, I'll be — !" The door shut on him. In the hallway she waited a minute, face hidden in her hands. This day had been almost too much for her.

She banked the parlor fire. By the mantel clock — it was only ten-forty. Mother *had* been listening — *had* known Laurine had — almost — She turned out the lamps and passed the next closed door with the best imitation she could manage of her usual "Good night, Mother."

Stalking home in the cold, Jed didn't know his overcoat was still over his arm, his muffler trailing from one pocket on the walks of old brick. He hadn't expected to get this far tonight nor to be interrupted when and if he did — right on the verge! Damn it — something else was sure working on him. Cousin Carietta's voice came just as plainly: "A girl who would let you do that — !"

Never before — at this stage — had he been afraid. He was — actually afraid things *would* go his way. Sick or *crazy!* Wanting her like he did and yet — *hoping* she'd refuse — throw him out! Right there at the end things had been moving right along. No, by God! She'd fixed it with her mother how to get rid of him when things got rough. It wasn't *near* eleven! He felt a great surge of happiness. *No* fellow was going to get very far with a girl like *that*. That girl was smart — and lots besides. *Plenty!* Enough to be — one of the Hadyn women?

Time had little significance in the old white cottage directly across Thaxton from Storrow Hill. Set back among stunted oaks and house-high shrubs, it was as drab and inconspicuous as its occupants Miss Nathalia Storrow and Trina Storow, her fifth cousin and junior by two generations. Originally there had been a "dog run" from front to back between its two halves of three rooms each. They were "widely separated halves," as many who had to traverse the dog run in winter had been heard to say. The dog run was now closed in to form a long room, but it still looked like a "dog run." The heavy growth of trees and bushes held the cold in; and in hot weather (which was most of the time) entrapped the heat. The whole place seemed to be unalterably opposed to change, to have much in common with Miss Nathalia.

It was town knowledge that she as the only living daughter of General Hugh Storrow, head of the family from 1840 to 1859, should at least have been *invited* to continue to make her home in Storrow Manor on Storrow Hill. She had been born and raised there — had a right to die there. But, no. Carietta had thought differently. Being moved out was what it had amounted to, really. Her brother, Leonidas (father of Carietta's Webley) had surely meant that Miss Nathalia keep her girlhood's upper southeast bedroom, the best in the house, although there had been times when Leonidas' widow, Clematis, in her time had tried to dislodge her — unsuccessfully. Miss Nathalia had outlasted *her*, too. In 1869 she had been left in undisputed regency of Storrow Hill. She must have considered the possibility that her nephew, Webley Storrow, would marry, but she certainly never envisioned such a wife for him as Carietta Cahoon.

Where Clematis had never been able to remove her and finally hadn't much wanted to, "this Carietta was implacable, my dear, positively implacable!" There had been one slight hitch. It was not slight at all to Carietta. She had "naturally assumed" that when the impending move took place, Grandmother Julia's little pomegranate bookstand, "part and parcel of the Reardon Mahogany," would remain in Thaxton Manor where it belonged. As one who avoided all unpleasantness, Carietta had herself gone to Miss Nathalia's room while the latter was at a church social to get the bookstand. The procedure thereafter would have been much the same as that which had sent Rosaline down in defeat. There was one slight difference: Miss Nathalia had locked her door and taken the key with her. It had made Carietta "positively ill." And when the day of the move came Miss Nathalia hadn't let go the carved handle of the stand (which free of books weighed only a few pounds) until she had been installed across the street, bag, baggage and bookstand. Aside from the fact that the pomegranate-carved bit was the only weapon the old woman had which could even dent Carietta's armor, her claim was not without merit: "The cottage" was "every bit as suitable for Ma's bookstand as Storrow Manor."

Nathalia knew well that Julia Reardon Storrow inheriting Syringa and having no need for it, had in turn willed it to her "eldest inheriting" daughter, Sironia Reardon Thaxton, Poor pitiful Chrysée, of course, was not of "inheriting" caliber. Into Syringa, the just-married Sironia had moved her bridegroom, Elijah Thaxton. There they had lived until evicted by the ever-conjectured, never-explained means by which *Old* Tom Bly had got possession of it. Broken in spirit and with no haven ready for them, the 'Lije Thaxtons with little Milly had moved "temporarily" into "the cottage." Planning many new homes, building none, they had lived on here "temporarily"—for some twenty years. When Millicent had finally been brought to her senses and married her first cousin Calvin Thaxton, Junior, she came as bride to Thaxton Hill which had descended to her uncle, Calvin, Senior. Soon after both her parents had died.

Carietta had found the small dog-run house long vacant and used as a family "catch-all." She had "sensed" instantly what to do with it. Within a week of assuming "command" of Storrow Hill, long wash lines of muslin slips appeared in Storrow Hill's back yard and Miss Nathalia found herself domiciled (with bookstand) in the "catch-all." Various females of the family not financially situated to exercise choice in anything were tried out as "companions." One by one they chose dishonor—that is, they "accepted positions"—and moved out.

Those were trying days for Carietta. She grew more and more tired of callers suggesting that that which she had no idea of doing was her bounden duty: to take Miss Nathalia *back* on Storrow Hill. Sooner

or later with the penchant of Hill Family cousins for dying and leaving one or more loved ones destitute, she felt sure one would show up to be "thrown to" Miss Nathalia and not have the backbone to escape. Destiny eventually had seen the futility of opposing Carietta. In 1886 it had washed up on the Sironian shore a baby girl of four stemming back to the original Eliphalet Storrow (1775–1840). Not only "adrift" but completely devoid of prospects and (later) spunk, that described Trina Storrow.

At eighteen, Trina was medium tall, medium blonde, medium sallow, not "very" anything except quiet and thoughtful. She was never very well and never very sick. Her flat slenderness cried in vain for fichus, shawls, "gay deceivers" and hoopskirts. Her schooling had been taken over by Miss Nathalia when she "heard something" in the girls' privy. Miss Nathalia never revealed what. This tutoring had cut the girl off still more from the world outside the interlocking thicket enclosing the catch-all. Fortunately these two, who could never get even terms from the world outside, could here make their own.

Miss Nathalia's "income"' came regularly on a check signed by Calvin Thaxton, head of the family and administrator of the Storrow Estate. Miss Nathalia was too well bred to inquire how her income was figured or she would have learned Calvin paid most of it. She maintained family connections by clockwork calls. An exact written record was kept showing those owed, owing and how long. She and Trina attended all family functions side by side, going, during and returning. Carietta never missed her fortnightly call on Miss Nathalia and Trina, nor they, attendance at her "Every-other Wednesdays." If these visits occasionally produced statements with subsoil inferences, they came from the other two, never from Trina, once dubbed "A Sylphlike Cipher." It was Miss Carietta who had rapped Jed's knuckles and repeated the remark many times — until her plans for remodeling *him* took form.

While Miss Milly was seeing "the best evening of her year" disintegrate painfully; while Jed was coming squarely up against honest love, a factor both new and frightening, Miss Nathalia and Trina before a very warm grate fire in the former's bedroom sat like Egyptians buried in a sitting position, waiting for nothing. This crowded little bedroom served, too, as a parlor, library and (on Saturdays when Trina had lugged in the huge tin tub) Miss Nathalia's private bath. The steams of this last use were still in its far corners, misting fancy white-enameled mantel and two clocks, four old chairs, the pomegranate bookstand and three tables. Small rugs, themselves worn, concealed all holes in old carpet. Among many small "oils," painted by Miss Nathalia in years gone, hung her most prized objet d'art, the treasured tail of a sorrel horse.

If anyone wondered (there is no evidence that anyone ever did) how these two women occupied their time, it was all quite simple. In the daytime hours Trina kept this room clean and Miss Nathalia "wrote." Everything had to be removed from its place and dusted or wiped or soaked in warm suds then scrubbed with an old toothbrush each week — by Trina, Miss Nathalia supervising closely. Their meals took little time, none of Miss Nathalia's.

That Hill Family relic had something far more enduring than money, the most accommodating of imaginations. Her "disappointment in love" was the best, almost the *only* thing that ever happened to her. Out of no other situation open to her could she have squeezed so much or such enduring satisfaction. As Sylvia Hadyn, who bore no one ill, had said just before she died in childbirth, "If Cousin Nathalia's Yankee, Abner Something, *had* come back for her, it would have literally ruined her life!" Jed had phrased the same sentiment rather differently: "She's not only done her memory of him over to suit herself, but has a handsome hank of horse tail, two things nothing can take *away* from a girl!"

Was she, as one of Philip Hadyn's earlier poems described her, "free of these, the sweet torments of flesh"? Perhaps. Once only had life come close in its passing. On this occasion she had passed it. In her far youth, she had ridden by the Storrow Cow Lot at the very moment that Rex, General Hugh Storrow's prize bull, had broken into it from his pen. That had confirmed something she had suspected. Miss Nathalia had seen everything. She had often thought of it since, but she was not "dwelling on it" now. She *never* dared after dusk had set in.

"*I still* think it was a great mistake!" Miss Nathalia was not dead, had moved in her chair to take up a linen dresser scarf to be done "in pansies." She spoke across the grate of rosy charcoal. "For Milly to use the yellow roses two years in succession, I mean."

"Oh, so do I!" Such animation as Trina possessed fluttered briefly and died. "I do wish she'd listen to *you* — have the receiving line in the library instead of out in the hall. Everybody came in blown to pieces and had to shake all those hands while holding on to cloaks and gloves and veils — although I'm sure I looked worse than they — "

"You looked your best, my dear." The clack of embroidery needle was difficult to distinguish from that of recently acquired and not yet trustworthy teeth. "I know someone *else* who thought so, too!"

Trina's face already red in the unventilated room began to glisten. She gave a pained little titter, was instantly and properly ashamed.

"I refer — as your maidenly blushes show, my dear — to Jedediah Haydn's 'forsaking all others' to dance *four* consecutive dances with you. Whatever else may be said against Jedediah — and heaven only knows what isn't — he doesn't hesitate to show it when he thinks a

girl — personable. I remember a certain young man," she never mentioned the name of her Abner from the North, "who was similar. He would just sit and look at a young lady he admired without saying a word. Didn't have to. 'His eyes bespoke his thoughts.' Of course — I intimated it had to stop, as any girl of breeding would have — in those days."

"Did he? Stop, I mean?"

"Sometimes he would — "

"And the other times — ?"

"La, child! Well, a girl has to make allowances — *he* was so in love! I planned to let him tell me at Cousin Pluto's 1861 fox-hunt ball — but by then he'd — had to go!"

"Darling!" Trina had slipped to the floor to lay her face on old knees. Then, as if suggested by that party of 1861, "Cousin Carietta *made* Jed dance with me and he couldn't get away — any sooner."

"Carietta!" Her thread had broken and to renew it took time, of which there was no scarcity. "How do you know she did?"

"I asked Jed."

"Trina! I never heard of such a thing! If a young man had ever given me such an answer — if, indeed, I'd even asked him to, I'd have forbidden him my home — "

"I — thought it was — kind of nice. He knew I was wondering why."

"Must you insist on always 'hiding your light'? As admirable a quality as modesty is in a young girl, there's a limit. *You've* passed it."

"But I think it'd be *worse* to — deceive myself. I kept after him to take me back to you and — go on with Laurine. She kept exchanging looks — " this was as near spite as Trina had ever come, " — with him. She's — *beautiful!*"

Sniff! Sniff! It was not entirely Miss Nathalia's asthma. "That disgraceful scene at the summerhouse! Moira Lipscomb must be insane! 'All the world well lost for love!' Must have spent many wretched hours since — "

"I don't think so." Plain, lightly freckled face looked so meek that not even her thin-skinned companion could resent the mild contradiction. "Miss Moira — "

"*Miss* Moira? She was your Cousin Sylvia's upstairs maid!"

"She — she's Mrs. Marshall Lipscomb *now!* And she's awful sweet. She's — jolly, too. I'm glad she did it. She wanted to see, and I'm afraid Mister Lipscomb prefers coming alone."

Sniff! Sniff!

"I *really* think he does it mostly for her good. He always grabs my

program and enjoys dancing with me — or seems to. A man can't *ever* describe a party. I — I dropped by to see her today — "

"How long has this *very* democratic friendship been — in existence?"

"For years! She's not 'cultured' the way we mean it. But she's pretty and lively and *good* company. Sometimes I think she's all the things I'm not. A girl needs — friends she can talk — Oh, I — I'm sorry."

"My dear, family approval and disapproval don't mean what they once did. If you enjoy being with Moira Lipscomb — "

"Oh, I do! She's so — so sincere. And you really should see her imitations — *especially* the one of Cousin Carietta. *You'd* love that one! She's a natural-born mimic — only the one of Cousin Milly is a little — mean, I think."

"I can imagine! It was — er — superb, the way Millicent passed the whole thing off."

"Miss Moira says Cousin Milly did it more to show her own refinement and consideration than to help her."

"That raises a very nice question — one you may with profit keep before you." The needles kept going. The long spine straightened. "Millicent probably thinks it was to cover over a very awkward situation and to save embarrassment all around — whereas the truth may well be nearer Moira Lipscomb's — idea. *My* point is that we poor humans are more often than not the *last* to know *why* we do things. We glibly ascribe our actions to the noblest of motives. That is fortunate. If man always understood his *real* ones, he might have nothing but contempt for himself. How stale would be a world without self-deception — if, indeed, there were any world *left!*"

"Cousin Nathalia, you don't believe that."

"Whether I do or not, it isn't a safe subject for too detailed analysis. 'Oh! that way madness lies'! Don't take umbrage over what I said about your friend Moira. There's probably more there than meets the eye."

"Oh, there is — really there is. I think she would even agree with what you just said about real reasons. One minute she's saying how silly it is to lay so much store by Sironia society and the very next that it's never 'accepted' her but will Tam, if she has to *cram* him down its throat!"

The old woman took time to knot and bite a thread and change from yellow floss to purple. "Understandable!"

"I think so. But it's a little frightening sometimes to hear how she talks to Little Tam, telling him the way she's been slighted and how it'll be up to him to show them! With me right there, too! I'm sure — at times like that — she doesn't know *why* she carries on so."

"No doubt!" After a long, long silence, she bit her thread with a sharp click of too regular, too white teeth that finished not only a pansy but the subject. "My dear, we *have* digressed from what I brought up — deliberately. Suppose last night was the beginning of — Jedediah's coming to his senses?"

"To his senses — ?"

"You know what I mean, miss. Don't pretend you don't. For one, I'm inclined to agree with something Carietta let drop — also deliberately. It would be the best thing for him to marry *you!*"

"Oh, no-o!" Sallowness was liberally splotched with red. "It isn't — kind!" She was crying.

"Don't be a fool, Trina! The whole family's worried about the way he's — "

"Yes, I — know. Jed's awful, I guess."

"You're the only female who thinks him awful — *if* you do! Boys are wild just like — like cattle." That had slipped out. "The family — in years past — has had this very same problem, as the old diaries tell. The same solution has been found — almost always: Team a fast horse with a slow one!"

"Please, Cousin Nathalia, let's not ever mention this — Why, he — he's even made advances to Miss Moira!"

"As well he might!" The sniff seemed to interrupt itself. "No — I take that back. One thing I'll grant Moira Lipscomb is she's too big a fool about Marshall to — be indiscreet. But about the other — Carietta has the right idea."

"You and she've discussed it! Oh, Cousin Nathalia! No man'll ever *want* to marry me, and that's the only way I'd — "

Long, deep-lined camel-face smiled inscrutably. "Many a girl *talks* that way — but she always comes round. You can *call* it doing your duty by the family!" The relish in spinster innuendo was not far from the libidinous. "You admire people who're full of fun. Well, Jed's full of that — too!"

"Honestly, I — I — can't stand you talking like that to — "

"So — you *are* in love with him! Carietta said so." Carefully she folded and put away her fancy work, paused only long enough for: "And I can think of a reason or two why your Cousin Millicent might like to have Jed married and out of *her* way!"

Calvin and Jed kept their gaze high in the tall pines of the Hadyn Farm. Their springy tread on dead needles was only a soft, crunchy rustle. Squirrel rifles hung, muzzle down, in the crooks of their right arms for instant hoisting at a flurry of brown fur. Each had two tawny

bodies already dangling from his belt. It was a Sunday of autumn browns, reds and golds shaded in heavy patterns by rough bronze trunks and towering green branches. The scent was mostly pine.

The hunt had gone on for an hour now, could last only a short time longer. Was the boy never going to get to *why* he'd asked him out here to hunt? Not just asked — insisted! Must be something out of the ordinary if it couldn't be talked of in the Bank nor on either of their Hills where the Negroes heard just about everything. Calvin had an idea as to what it was. His aquiline face smiled wryly. He was living over again the weeks just before his marriage. Had "the family" ever had an *approved* marriage without one or the other loving someone else — at first? Yes, his sister and her Philip, Jed's own parents — but look what had become of them!

"Up there — to your *left,* Uncle Calvin!"

He came back to the here-and-now. His gun raised as he turned, one eye almost shut. There, on the tallest pine, between the first two branches, almost the color of the bark was a flattened, upside-down little pelt with twitching bushy tail. With the shot and slight recoil of the gun against his shoulder, the furry bit leapt out from the tree, fell, jerking — a little. "Good un! I'll get him." Jed had leaned his rifle against a pine trunk and was parting a clump of sumac red. He reached in and lifted the brown trophy. "Broke his neck." He handed the squirrel to Calvin, who clamped its tail under his belt with the other two. New bloodstain joined the old ones on dark green corduroy. "Want to 'set a while,' Uncle Calvin? We'll get more if we wait until the sun dips a little — "

"All right." Calvin slid his back down along a pine, unloaded his rifle, and let its trigger guard lie across legs straight out before him. The boy had staged all this rather clumsily — but could Calvin have done any better — twenty years ago?

Against another tree, the other sat knees drawn up tight under brown canvas trousers.

"This is my idea of living, Jed. Just cool enough to be comfortable in the sun — the quiet — smell of the woods — and no need to go — anyplace!"

"Glad you're not in a hurry today. I don't bring many to this neck of the woods. The squirrels are thickest here and I want them to stay that way — though they do take most of the pecan crop. S-sh, up yonder." A brown finger automatically pointed, but Calvin didn't raise his gun. "Through for the day?"

"I was wondering if we've a right to shoot more than we need — a hell of a thought for a huntsman! But the woods do funny things to poor foolish humans, bring out what's in 'em. That's a pet theory of mine. Take that Reardon's Pasture rape last spring. Would it have

happened if that painter fellow had come across the girl alone in a back alley — or a downtown warehouse, or anywhere except where it did?"

"I'd say yes! I saw that arty bastard when they dragged him out from behind White Rock. A devil's face, if I ever — "

"How would *my* face look facing — Sironia mob rule? You expected him to look evil — and he did. It's another human failing, Jed, to choose the way we want things and then *make* the facts support them. That's pure, verbatim Cousin Nathalia! Part of her stand-by: 'We never fool anybody else nearly so much as we do ourselves.' Not sure I agree — think sometimes we don't fool ourselves but want others to think we do."

The younger eyes swung on him questioningly and then away. "You've lead up to what I've been trying to get at all afternoon — why I brought you out here. I've stopped fooling myself."

"Fine!" The fifth squirrel since they had sat down came into sight, head down, body flattened against a big trunk, looked them over jerkily an instant and then spiraled on around the trunk out of sight.

"Cousin Carietta has embarked on another — crusade. This one's to get me married. She doesn't like what the town gossips are saying!"

"Said anything that isn't true?"

Jed's eyes dropped to his fingers sorting dry pine needles, by lengths. "No, sir. I couldn't expect *you* to understand, but — "

"I know that I'm held up as some kind of — model by fathers who don't want their sons to behave as they themselves did — but, because there's never been but one girl I ever wanted, I *shouldn't* be! Tell you something else: I don't believe there ever was a man so horny but what the *right* wife could 'gentle him down.' In your case, I think it's — the same one you think it is. Hold on! A fellow named Morris must have had *us* in mind when he wrote: 'So strong is that wild lie that men call pride!' Jed, you love Laurine Lane and she's the one can 'gentle you down.' I'd bet on it. But you think no Lane ever born is good enough for a Hadyn. Believe me, Jed — any girl a man loves genuinely is good enough. Sometimes, as in this case, *too* good!"

"*If* it was reassurance I brought you out here for, I — "

"It *was*. You want to marry Laurine, as Carietta has, of course, told all the family. You want me to tell you to hop to it. Isn't that it?"

"Damn if it ain't! How does Aunt Milly feel?"

"I'll assume the responsibility of converting *her*. And Cousin Carietta is no real obstacle — that is, if you're sure — and can *stay* sure?"

"You have the *friendliest* way of kicking a man in the teeth! But, it's God's own truth: I'm so crazy about Laurine I didn't sleep a wink until daylight. Her mother's a holy terror, but I like old Stacey. And

Laurine's made to order — beautiful, sensible, gets more fun out of life than the whole kit and kaboodle of — did you ever get much *fun* out of life, Uncle Calvin?"

"'Fun' isn't the prime goal of living, Jed. I don't know many over thirty who have very much of it, no matter how strenuously they pursue it. No, *I've* never had much 'fun' — as you mean it. But I have something I'd rather have, something that having too much fun might have made impossible — and that's enough."

"Wonder if *I'll* ever feel that way! Only one way to find out, I guess. I *sure* don't want to be hung, upside-down, on the family tree as its cham-peen woman-chaser of all time. You and your Mister Morris to the contrary notwithstanding, I'm going to marry Laurine. And I'm going to tell Cousin Carietta, herself, in person this very — "

"Jed — I wouldn't — not until — not any sooner than you *have* to. Give her the chance and she'll bore her neck to — 'to save you from yourself,' she'll call it."

CHAPTER 7

REMEMBER *EVER*THING, Miz Moira, so's you kin tell me whin you-all gits back."

"It'll be too late when we get back, Josie. You come over tomorrow." Ready for half an hour, she wasn't yet able to leave the mirror of oak dresser in lean-to bedroom. Marshall had ordered "special" the dark red velvet for her dress, and she and Josie had worked all night two nights to make it up by a pattern Miss Irma said Miss Carietta had almost bought. It *was* pretty — full puff sleeves and tight from the waist down almost to the knees. If only her stomach wasn't always so uncomfortable inside a straight-front-and-habit-back corset. The long red gloves didn't exactly match the dress, but her black horsetail pompadour did stay over a "rat" better than some women's. Oh, dear, her peonies were still another red! She wasn't going to let on. Marshall had ordered them "special," too. At the rate they were shattering, there wouldn't be anything but stalks and leaves by the time they got to Elliotts', anyway.

"It's eight-thirty, Moira," Marshall called from the kitchen, turned over to him to dress in. He felt aggrieved, had had to scrub his own back, with Josie in the house, "Aren't you ready *yet?*"

Moira exchanged knowing smile with Josie. "In a minute, Mister Lipscomb." More than anything for years she wanted his first glimpse of her in her finery to be a moment to remember. She draped the black cape over her right arm and laid loose-petaled peonies on top of it. Another thrilling look in the mirror and she turned the wick of the lamp down. The corset creaked as she was just able to bend low enough to kiss the sleeping Tam in his crib. "If he wakes up, Josie, and tries to make you give him a gumdrop — don't you do it!"

"No, *ma — am!*"

"Well — *one,* then!"

The time had come. Moira took a deep breath that raised her white bosom almost out of her red velvet "decolltage" (that's what the magazines called it). She'd die of shame if anything like that'd actually happen. Hmmm! Some of these fine ladies around town would die, too, of envy. Natural color burned furiously. She flung the door back, standing squarely in it.

"Where's my white silk handkerchief, Moira?" Marshall was carrying in a wad all the clothing he had worn that day, hadn't even looked at her. Burning pleasure more brilliant than any rouge would dare imitate left her face.

"Mister Marshall oughter be 'shamed o' — "

"Never mind, Josie!" Moira didn't want sympathy, didn't want to go to the party nearly as much as she had. "There, Mister Lipscomb — on the floor by the stove."

"Um!" he grunted as he bent almost popping tight white vest. "No wonder I couldn't find it."

"Like — my dress?"

"Sure — fine! Going to let Nanette Lane make you talk too much tonight, say things you'll be — "

"No."

"For God's sake, remember not to *stare!*"

She bit her lips together. For two cents she'd shatter the peonies, tear off this dress and — no, she wouldn't, either. After all, the Elliotts were as much on trial as she was — *more!* But it was mean of him, all the same, not to care how she looked after all the trouble he'd gone to and Miss Irma and she and Josie had gone to. He could at least —

"Come on!" He left the kitchen door open. Josie took the peonies for a moment and threw the black cape around her. She followed him to the buggy she had hitched up just before she began dressing. It had turned off warm — for December — almost like April and Christmas, only twenty — no, only nineteen days away.

Marshall was already in the buggy, its folding top up. He was adjusting the plush laprobe over his knees while holding the reins and whip. Old Blue, seeming never to stand on all four legs at the same time, spent her life in a constant state of relaxation. Already her 1901 colt was showing-up a little. Moira loved Old Blue, fed her and tended her with something very much like — fellow feeling? She pushed the blue-gray lips gently back as great white teeth suddenly tried for a mouthful of peony foliage.

"Mister Lipscomb — quit primping, and cut the wheel!"

"Blue!" Without a rein moved, the wise old lady side-stepped, then backed a few feet for no reason except to show a little independence, the way a woman's a right to now and then.

"Aren't you going to get out and help me in?"

"Quit joking!" He reached over and took her right elbow under the peonies. With swirls of velvet and stifled gasps she swung up beside him. Old Blue, characteristically, started too soon, plumping Moira down on the black leather seat, then settled into a slow jog out the open gate.

"The new windows look even nicer at night!" They were passing the Store. Moira knew how to get him in the right humor.

"Ought to — cost enough. Plate glass isn't given away!"

"Lord, no! I — *I* don't like any of the piece-goods in the window as well as I do — my dress's — "

"What more could a woman ask? 'Case you don't know it, that's the *very* best grade of velvet — " He felt the nap over her knee, and she placed her hand on top of his. He did not draw it away. This was going to be a real fine evening. She was a little angry for letting it make her so happy.

If only he'd put his arm around her just a minute or two. He didn't.

Thaxton Hill was well lighted upstairs and down. The hurricane gas lamps on each side of the front door were new. Moira was most interested in the dull orange of Mister Lance's drawn shades. "Poor boy! If he outlives his parents, nobody's going to want him living with them. Why, he might — might change — get violent like that Pyramus they say ha'nts the — "

"Moira! You promised me you'd forget that 'ha'nt' foolishness. Look — the Elliott Hotel's all lit up for fair. Bound for Hazel to show off she has electricity! Looks like everybody and his cousin is — "

"*Every*body?"

"Yes. Calvin phoned this afternoon he had some information he'd give me tonight at the party."

"About those — legal documents I signed last month?"

"Yes." He drew up to the first vacant place along the curb. Instead of getting out on his side into the mud, he climbed over her cloaked knees and leaped to the curb. With the reins he turned the

wheel and waited for her to climb down, "What're you waiting for now?"

"For a *gentleman* to happen by—and help me down!"

"What gentleman helped you down from reshingling Old Blue's stall this afternoon?"

"I'm not on top of any barn now—and I'm dressed a little different."

"A-all right!" Holding the reins in his left hand he extended both of them to grasp her elbows and swing her down onto the walk beyond him.

"Hitch Blue on short rein, Mister Lipscomb—you know how homesick she gets. Be a good girl, Blue, I'd pat you again but it's always your *white* hairs that come off—" Marshall swung out the concrete disk linked to a leather hitch rein by an iron swivel, clamped the snap-end to Old Blue's bit, and put the disk well up on the curb.

"My, everybody *is* here! And on time, too." Moira was sure she knew why: No woman in her right mind would willingly miss the Thaxtons' entrance.

The enormous lawn didn't look so dead in the light from enormous blue-gray bulk with white filigree and window frames. The closer Moira got, the larger it loomed. On the left the front parlor bulged forward, while on the right the porch, small for this climate, rounded the curve that rose to a shingled gray turret above the third floor. Still farther to the right the enormous covered driveway expressed additional contempt for the lines of the Thaxton and Storrow homes. (The Hadyn home, burned in 1890, was now far closer kin to "The Elliott Hotel" than to its predecessor.) "I'm so excited I'm—*so* excited, Mister Lipscomb!"

They climbed the six gray steps speckled in gray and black, and rang the bell. Ten-foot, ornately milled doors framed stained-glass inserts each of which held a green laurel wreath design about a large golden "E." One of the doors was opened. It was as if the party rushed forth to meet her, drew her in. It smelled just as she had known it would, warm air and perfume and flowers; heavy *new* carpets and draperies. If she could, she would just stand here a while—inhaling it.

Old Pomphrey was bowing 'way down. "Come in, Mistuh Marshall an' good eve-nin', Miz Lipscomb. Glad to see *you*-all out dis eve-nin'. Up de stairway, please ma'am, please, suh—de ladies' rume to de right at de top, de men's rume to de lef'—fer yo' wrappin's."

"*She's* having her line where a line *ought* to be—in the front parlor!" Moira whispered. Marshall was already nodding. She nodded, too. Nobody could have told that right at the time—Moira had no one to nod to.

She hurried him up the narrow, fancily balustraded stairs, although

her pretty, square jaw did drop at the complete nakedness of the four-foot nymph coyly exposing herself in glowing lilies. Very much she wanted to run her hand over the wall covering to see if it was paper or leather. That could be managed better when someone else was talking to Marshall. At the top of the stairs, the upper hall was enormous. Never had Moira seen so much space completely wasted. She had forgotten which direction Pomphrey said for her to go. "That way!" Marshall elbowed her decisively.

He went on in the men's room. Bill was passing around a bottle. Each of the ten men around him up-ended it, head thrown back. Postmaster Stacey Lane was here, looking dumpy, anxious to please, more than a little out of place. Gagged on his drink. No Calvin yet? As he drank his turn, Marshall was hoping — for everybody's sake — that Milly was not going to make things any worse.

"I heard a good one today, you fellows — down to the post office —"

Marshall listened, and laughed when he was supposed to, but he was not afterward sure what Stacey Lane said or whose arm it was around his shoulders heavily. Stacey's jokes were invariably long, mostly in Negro dialect, which he thought he did well. They usually related what some field hand on his hundred-acre place had been supposed to say to him, although his hands certainly had a knack for saying things which were "chestnuts" of years standing.

All the men were uncomfortable in tight-fitted black and boiler-plate shirts. When they could be buttoned at all, white kid gloves cut into chunky wrists. Long coattails swung foolishly askew with every move. The smoke was thick and the room was hot. Bill's whiskey was good. They lingered.

To make way for the ladies, everything of a personal nature had been removed from the "Nile-Green Room" — except, somehow, one lone hairpin caught between the mirror of the mahogany veneer dresser and its frame. The bed with an ornate mahogany headboard six feet high, footboard four, was piled with the women's "wrappin's." The Storrows' Melissa, supposedly in charge, had *had* to patter down the back stairs to tell Charlotte that Mrs. Rogan had "busted clean outer 'er corset comin' up dem steep stairs. I had ter jam 'er back down in it. An' whin I did I seen 'er corset-covuh'd bin mended *twict*."

"Oh — I didn't know you were coming, Moira!" Nanette Lane, in a new peach-colored dress, more expensive than any of her daughter's, arched exquisite little brows in deep-dimpled face. "I meant to send word to you — the other day — to ask you what's good to take rust stains out of white china silk. Dear Sylvia always said you knew literally *everything* — like that."

Moira's temper was rising, must not be indulged here. "Miss Sylvia was that way about everybody, *Nanette* — always seeing their good

points and saying *nice* things. When I was in service there, she led me to expect it of others, too."

It was good to see the angry contraction of tiny nostrils. "But—about the rust—my dear?"

"I'll have to look it up—I don't keep anything rusty in my home!" She shouldn't have said that: it had said itself, besides everybody in town wanted Nanette Lane sat on hard. "I'll let you know."

"How very sweet, Moira!" Nanette was coiling to spring. "Just let me know how much I owe you."

"Of course!" (When Marshall could buy and sell poor Stacey Lane twenty times over!) "Oh, dear!" In her concealed anger, Moira had crushed her peonies tight, left a greenish streak across her bare arm between glove and red sleeve-puff.

"You know where the bathroom is!" Nanette's dark eyes leapt with malicious pleasure. "Oh, I forgot you haven't ever been here before."

"Moira gets as lost in this enormous place as I do." Trina had just come in. "That purple lotus screen should hide the door—it *does!* Let me do it, Moira, honey, before I put my gloves on and am helpless. Then we'll go down the line together. Where *did* Marshall get those red peonies? Aren't they gorgeous, Mrs. Lane?"

"Very!" shot back over a humped shoulder flaunting out of the room.

"Trina! Honestly, I don't know whether to thank you most for saving my feelings—or her *life!*"

Trina was using a wet towel. "You promised me you wouldn't let anything upset you tonight. Gracious, I've spilled some water down your glove—"

"What of it? Inside these kid gloves I'm sweating like a—"

"S-sh! Cousin Nathalia says 'horses sweat, men perspire, and ladies—glow'!"

"What does that make *me?*" Moira's loud deep laugh was, perhaps, the first genuine one heard in this room that evening; possibly, the last. Peony stains removed, with arms linked they joined Marshall. He was fretting like Old Blue at the head of the stair.

"Here comes Cousin Nettie Hicks," Trina whispered. "She's been acting so—funny toward me lately. Never lets a chance slip to say something that sounds complimentary until I think it over."

"Don't think it over! Say the word, and *I'll* settle Sloppy Nettie!"

"S-sh! Good evening, Cousin Nettie."

"Oh." Puff! "—it's Trina. Didn't recognize you—" Puff! "Looking right—nice. Wouldn't suspect you had *any* freckles hardly in this light."

"Trina, dear," Moira interrupted, "hadn't we better go back up to the top? Your Cousin Nettie needs the *whole* stairway."

As Jed had just pointed out *sotto voce* to Laurine, Hazel's delight with herself as a hostess was "approaching a state of inebriation." She was proud of her first "First Friday." She might even make it an annual event — just like the Thaxtons. Her russet chrysanthemums were magnificent. Heavy purple satin shone as it draped about her, and a purple aigrette made her inches taller. Her receiving line was not as long as she would have liked but long enough, mostly Bill's business friends and their wives.

She had *more* smilax than Milly Thaxton. And more paper flowers. Roses were everywhere entwined. Their American Beauty red, the smilax green and the white of dancing canvas showed beautifully in Sironia's only home "electrically lighted throughout." *So* becoming! The women couldn't stay away from her mirrors. Gaslight usually made powdered chalk ghastly. The few who had dared rouge their faces looked lovely. Hazel was already wishing she had, too.

Nearly everyone invited was already here. Everyone she could see seemed to be having as good a time as they had had at Thaxtons. Long-suffering Stacey Lane wanted to move on down the receiving line, but Nanette thought she was helping out by talking to the hostess. Bill was doing his best to look the interested host — bless him! One of the tallest men in the room, he was one of the strongest and, to her, the handsomest. Only one more thing was needed. The good Lord knew she couldn't abide Milly Thaxton, but in a town this size a woman couldn't give her husband the support he needed socially if Milly Thaxton ignored her invitation.

Just listen to Nanette rubbing in the salt! "I wish dear Milly would hurry up. She's *so* fond of my Laurine. She wants her for dinner tomorrow night and didn't say formal or not. Laurine is so particular about dressing correctly, won't put on a thing without asking me." Dimples jabbing in like her words, Nanette made a quick thrust. "A penny for your thoughts, Hazel, dear — or must I bid higher?"

"Excuse me for not listening. I was trying to imitate your gracious smile, Nanette!"

"Did you hear that, Stacey Lane? He *used* to say my smile was what first won him. Deny *that* if you can, Stacey Lane!"

The dumpy, whipped-down little man gave a very sickly, second-hand-looking smirk. Nanette was a help, as keenly as Hazel disliked her. How in the world had she and that mouse ever contrived a fine, wholesome daughter like Laurine? Jed Hadyn was up to *something* there. It would serve Nanette right if he — ran true to form: but Hazel would hate it for Stacey's sake, for the girl's, too. It was all right for a girl to be self-confident and smart, but she'd better watch herself with Jed Hadyn!

One possible strain had been eased: Carietta Storrow had been called out of town by some cousin-or-other's lingering illness. Anyway, she

had sent regrets. They were unavoidable — and everyone knew it. Also, everyone knew that Milly Thaxton *wasn't* out of town. The purple aigrette in gingery hair kept up its St. Vitus shaking. In the increasing warmth, Hazel realized she had put on too much Cinnamon Pink scent. Never for a second did she lose sight of the great front doors. Calvin had done the "accepting."

At nine-ten the Thaxtons still had not arrived. Nor at nine-thirty. There could be no mistake, for the eight-foot-high walnut clock in the hall was well lighted by the bronze calla lilies. At ten there was not a sign of Thaxtons. At ten-thirty she knew. They weren't coming. They had deliberately *not* sent regrets! Of the many possibilities Hazel had considered, this, the rudest of all, had not been among them. She still couldn't reconcile it with Calvin's ways.

Brown lips became entirely bloodless. She plunged into talk with squashy Selma Rogan recklessly, determinedly gay. "I think we'll be able to dissolve the line in just a few minutes." She *couldn't* do so yet — quite. "Everybody in the world is here, it seems. Bill says I used the county tax rolls for my invitation list — hah! But, confidentially, that is the kind of list *he* would approve. In a town this size, he thinks everyone should be asked. But there isn't room. So many wouldn't enjoy it — and yet would be too polite to decline, and that *would* be embarrassing."

"Oh, my, yes! I *do* agree. I think you have the right attitude — sensibly democratic, I call it." Anyone who knew Selma knew that her "democratic" like Nanette Lane's carried a snapper at some of Hazel's unfashionable friends. None of them had been overlooked. None of them had failed to attend. "Who do you think I saw today, Hazel? It was that beautiful *café au lait* infant Pieter Hadyn — er — contributed. I've never seen more gorgeous eyes and — my dear — " She lifted a white, rhinestone-set turkey-tail fan and looked over it so that the whole assemblage might know that while it was impossible to hear her she was imparting information they would certainly like to have. "Thi-is child is — while unmistakably a niggra — the very spit'n' image of little Nelia Hadyn!"

"Oh, well, the resemblance will probably fade. Children change so quickly — almost overnight — "

"Think so?" That said even more plainly: A lot *you* know about children, Hazel Elliott!

"Oh, yes — doctors' books are all agreed on that." Just as if she'd read one. "But excuse us, my dear! Bill!" She turned toward him, arms and flowers raised for dancing.

Great round drops of sweat stood as if glued to his mottled forehead. His white collar had soggily pleated itself. She did not have to see to know that the sides of his shirt, under black broadcloth, were sodden with bluish-yellow stains. She pressed sharp little face for an

instant to his lapel — wet through. Her Bill, wet through and wretched over what *she'd* got him into!

"Don't mind, my darling," she mumbled. "I'll get even with her if it's the — "

"No!"

When Mister Lane claimed Hazel for the following dance, Bill did not do the correct thing, did not go direct to Nanette, waiting, eyes — and dimples — fixed on him. Instead he wheeled toward the punch bowl, in a bower of American Beauty red and smilax green at the rear of the large dining room.

More than one watched, for the most part in astonishment that Bill Elliott, of all people, would take a slight of this kind to the punch bowl. Bill Elliott was a circus roustabout and freight-car tramp, wouldn't ever be anything else. But he could surely put it away!

"Tellyphome callin' fer *you,* Mistuh Bill."

"Won't talk — no, *must* talk! I'm coming, Pomphrey."

It was Calvin. "Bill — I'll explain later. *Please* accept — accept the inexcusably late regrets of both Mrs. Thaxton and myself."

"Yesh — yesh, sure, Calvin, sure!"

"And, Bill — I want to see you. Will tomorrow night, up to Marshall's cabin, suit *you?*"

"Yesh — yesh — sure, Calvin, sure!"

"Well, I'll see him in the morning — and phone you. Believe me, Bill, I'm — I'm — "

"Yesh — yesh — sure! Oh, Calvin?" But he had hung up.

Bill swayed as he beckoned to Hazel, with some man he couldn't see clearly. They waltzed toward him, found him propped against one of the rented palms everyone used. "What is it, dear?" her eyes took him in. There was no anger, only hurt at what she had done to him. "What is it — Bill, dear?"

"Thaxtons just — phoned. *So* sorry — can't come — can't possh'bly come, Old Lady!"

"Oh, they did! Well, I — " She smiled up at whoever the blurred-looking man was who held her. "I am *so* sorry. We especially wanted Calvin. But, Bill, our guests!" She nodded toward the dining room.

There the "first serving" were seating themselves in fours about small white-clothed card tables for the supper which had been in preparation all week. The olives, the celery and salted nuts were all in place. Embroidered napkins and a bowl of hothouse red roses were on each table. The plates were laid. Service began. Bill shuffled unsteadily in. "Have a good time, folks, want *everybody* to have a good time at my wife's party — if you don't see what you want jus' yell for it! Plenty more where this come from. Honest, you never saw so much grub in one dump in your life! I — I know. Have a good time! Eat *hearty!* Hurry up, you colored boys, get 'em fed! Here!" In

sudden rush of hospitality, he seized a big flat pan of scalloped oysters from Young Fred. "I used to be the *best* hash-slinger in Bakersfield. That's in Cali-forny-a, Missis Lane! And we had to shovel it out quick! None quicker than Old Bill Elliott! Have some aw-sters?" From guest to guest he went, gingery muttonchop whiskers frizzling out wildly. "Have some awsters!" He balanced the pan unsteadily on one hand, a big kitchen spoon in the other, gave each guest an enormous helping of the steaming, mouth-watering dish. No one said a word as, all unknowing, he piled each helping carefully, not on a plate but neatly just to one side, on Lipscomb's very best grade of white damask.

Jed's Pegasus, dark bay coat shimmery in the night, had slowed on River Road near the North Wagon Bridge. The blooded animal hadn't been drawing the yellow and black hug-me-tight buggy for four years without knowing well what was expected of him. When the reins went completely lax he slowed to a buggy-creaking walk. He could do as he pleased, so long as he never got off the sandy road or stopped longer than was necessary to swing one way or the other to bite off a clump of dead grass. Without any guidance, Pegasus took a path through a tangle of pokeberry bushes. It was a path made mostly by himself and the yellow and black hug-me tight. Inside about twenty feet, he came to a halt, looked back for approval.

Laurine laughed and fluffed her light blue net, worn to save a row at home. "It's a shame to waste all his wonderful training, Jed." She raised from his arm, dark filmy curls brushing his lips. "But we're going *back*. How many times does a girl have to tell you — she's not going to — any more?" And when he just looked at her and pressed closer, "No, Jed — it's late."

"No, it's not. We slipped out of the Elliotts' *early*. Your folks won't be leaving for a good hour and a half yet. You know how your mother is about leaving parties."

"Yes." She couldn't help interrupting a little sob to kiss his rough cheek. "Jed, that's all — until we are married. Now — I want to — go back to the party — "

"Say you do?"

"Je-ed, don't kiss me — so much. Stop that! I mean, honestly, I — "

"But, su-ugar, we haven't time tonight to run through all the preliminaries. We'll just assume I've been begging and you've been objecting for hours. How's that?"

"You make me so mad I — I — never mind! You're so sure every girl'll finally give in. Well, I won't — not any more until — "

"Won't — what?"

"Oh-o-oh! Jed, it's too beautiful a night to fuss—Jed." She seemed to enjoy saying his name. While she was saying it she had let him swing her down to the sandy ground and close in his arms. "You just can't know, Jed, how awful it is for a girl." She was about to *really*-cry. "A boy can do things—and forget all about them, but a—"

"Laurine, you don't trust me!"

"That's the pitiful part, I *can't*. But I keep right on—loving you and I've promised to marry you *knowing*—"

"This is how *I* love *you!*" No girl could have doubted it.

"When're we going to—get married, Jed? A week ago you said right away. Yesterday it was in a week or two. And tonight you say you'll have to wait and see about—"

"It's for *you*. Right now I have to ask the Bank for every cent. But in a few months I'll be twenty-one. Then we can marry and go off on a real honeymoon. Not have to come right back to sign a lot of papers. Have pity on me—*I* can't wait!"

"For the fourth time—or don't *you* remember?"

"Laurine!" He held her more tightly, let the reins drag on the ground so that Peg would know he could graze, but not go far. "That don't sound a bit—like you."

"Stop that, Jed, it's too cold! Besides, I already hate myself for—"

He released her completely, left her alone, so alone a foot from him she couldn't stand it. He knew it.

Methodically, he folded his coat across the leather dashboard. He took the heavy purple laprobe from the floor of the buggy and two blankets from the back. To the same small clearing as those other three times he walked—and she followed. It was padded with dead cottonwood leaves, most of which had been raked there. Folded once, he spread the laprobe over the crackling leaves, made a pallet of the blankets on top and extended a hand. She took it, clung to it as she sank to her knees in his arms.

"Jed—you're tearing—something."

"Didn't mean to, honey. Just trying to undo it so we won't get your pretty blue dress all wrinkled up. I—I thought *these* hooks came first."

"I felt you figuring that out while we were dancing. It made me—furious!"

"And what else?"

"Stop it, Jed. Here, if you're going to be so rough, I'll unfasten it. But only to keep from going home in—in rags."

"Sure—sure—" His voice was so low that nothing of its usual jesting quality was left. She wasn't sure she could get free of all these—things. "Gosh—but you're pretty, honey. Every time—prettier than before!" He was hanging—things—on the bush nearest him.

Now he was coming toward her on his knees. It was always a surprise to her that below that dark, red face magnificently muscled skin was almost whiter than hers. Side by side, it was impossible to tell where one ceased to be and the other began. It was terrible! Low! Unbearable! They rolled into the blankets together, through air like water ten feet deep, and no longer cold but warm — more than that, so infinitely much more.

Above, leafless branches swayed across the late moon behind a drifting veil of mist. Clouds beyond stark branches tinged with silver seemed to spread — and spread — across the whole of heaven. She would remember every instant, the warmth, the chill, the beauty of it, the single bird-call. The sluggish swish of the river across a log was plain. Plain, too, the possessiveness, the possess*ed*ness. The two of them that could never really be two again. Remembering had no place here. The trees shut it out, the pokeberries shut it out, and most of all Jed Hadyn shut it out. This was a place for the present. The future must be like the present — *must* be. If it wasn't, she — but it must be. Fiercely her hands moved their full radius along the soft firmness of what was so completely a part of her that she had to seek reassurance and with it exaltation.

"Oh, Jed, stop — No, don't!"

He sank his mouth on hers, into hers, and all about. His arms tightened — every move a part of her, inside and out — Her consciousness embraced every part of him, until he seemed to plunge down upon her from a great height and then to lift her up — up — Silvered sky exploded in shattering brilliance. She knew that he had felt it, too, was holding on to vanishing miracle as desperately as she.

Not a leaf was stirring. Nor should it. Nothing must ever stir again. Nothing must ever change. He still held her, his lips asleep in the hollow of her neck, her arms limply asleep about him.

"Jed — ?"

"Huh?"

"You do, don't you?"

"What?"

"You know!"

"Yes — yes — *more* than ever! What *else* you want to know?"

"Nothing — nothing at all. That's all I — ever — want to know. Jed, to love you like I do is — sacrilegious! How I wish — wish — "

"What?"

"Never mind. We've simply *got* to get back to Elliotts' — please — "

He stood up. She rose to her knees to clasp him tight, so tightly that the old fear of herself came back. He lifted her face pressed in complete abandon against him, and swung it softly back and forth. Their eyes closed the distance between their faces. He drew her to her feet

and held her in a long kiss, just as heavy, but so — *so* different, of no all-important urgency now. She should have remembered, but never did, how quickly he calmed down.

Accomplishing swiftly the myriad things to be done, her movements gave out only the soft rustle of blue net against pokeberry twigs, the softer tug of comb through dank curls.

Even afterward, he loved her. That showed it was not like all those others before. He caught himself thinking: This makes my — No, through with that. He was through keeping count. He was turning over a new leaf — a whole book of new leaves. The Lanes might not have a dingy family tree to frame for the parlor, but they were fine people — at least, Old Stacey was. The *girl* was what counted. If Cousin Carietta so much as opened her Dresden china mouth about Laurine — well, he'd tell Cousin Carietta things that would singe holes in those cheesecloth slips!

"I'm ready, Jed — no! There's powder *all* over your coat."

At a brisk trot Pegasus drew them along River Road, then up Antietam to Main, and back to the Elliotts'. "Had a nice drive, Miss Lane?"

"Oh — so-so!" She smiled. "You don't know what a — confident feeling it is to be coming back to the party with a dress which shows not a single wrinkle. All the old female hyenas in their velvets and appliqué will know that I am not the kind of girl who lets fast men like Jed Hadyn 'take liberties'!"

They had no sooner entered than they were confronted by Mrs. Ballinger, completely Miss Carietta's slave and — tonight — her chief spy. "And *where* have you two young things been all evening?"

"A lot of us out on the lawn — see — " Jed shrugged and pointed to the numerous couples on the porch and walk, in flight from the overheated house and underheated chaperons.

"What *are* things coming to! Here dear Hazel has brought an expensive orchestra a hundred miles and nobody left on the floor under fifty!"

"With — " Jed looked about the floor, " — about fifty exceptions?"

"Don't be tiresome when I'm making a point, Jedediah Hadyn! Laurine, I want you to be nice to someone *worthwhile*." She smiled mischievously. "Jedediah, ask your Cousin Trina to excuse you for cutting that dance with her — and see if she can't trade around and let you have this one. I have someone for Laurine — "

"That all right, Laurine?"

"Certainly. I can't wait to meet Mrs. Ballinger's friend."

She winked behind the doll-like obesity.

Mrs. Ballinger didn't see. She was in a quandary. Her eyes casting about found no one. "Where *can* he have gotten to? Sit here, Laurine, dear — I won't be a minute."

"Here comes a boy I promised a dance. Please, bring your friend over — when you find him. I'd lo-ove to meet him!"

"All right, dear — " She smiled both at Laurine and to herself; not many women could have managed so smoothly, giving offense to no one, absolutely no one!

Jed found Trina where she had been most of the evening (excepting only her dances with Marshall, Mrs. Ballinger's husband, Bill Elliott and Stacey Lane). "Want to dance, Trina?"

"Not tonight, Jed. It — it's nice of you to ask me — and I do enjoy dancing with you — but I — I'm feeling a little po'ly, as Mammy Henderson says — "

"What's the matter — you mad at me?"

"Oh, no, Jed. I — I don't think I could be mad at you — " Thin cheeks were yellowish pink with the first blush he had ever seen in them. Trina, who he had once said didn't have a pore to her skin, was shiny of nose, cheeks and chin. "Ask me — some other time. I'm going upstairs and — lie down. I'll be all right in a — Je-ed!"

He had swept her into the tuneful thick of 'Tales from the Vienna Woods.' "I think I know what's wrong, Trina — and I'm sorry." Jed could be so sweet when he wanted to be that it was easy for a girl to tell herself that all those stories about him were — gross exaggerations. "Some members of this family of ours are up to their old tricks trying to pair people off. It's embarrassing to me, too, — but let's hit them where it'll hurt, ignore them!"

"Oh, Jed! I'd never have had the nerve to come right out — like that. I'd decided I couldn't stand being around you with you sure *I'd* had something to do with — with — "

"Forget it!" Their deep waltzing swoop forced a soft screech of surprise from Mrs. Lane lost in obviously dutiful attempt at covering up Stacey's poor out at dancing. "Oh, I'm sorry, Trina," Jed apologized, "I'm clumsy as a — "

"It was my fault — as you know very well. I get so little practice — "

"Now you're out for more compliments — like all the rest! Didn't know *you* had any vanity."

"That's the most awful thing ever said to a girl! But I do have less reason to — "

"That's not so. But you wouldn't care if it were."

"I used to — pitifully. I don't think any girl ever — suffered more than I did at school. Then I sort of reached an agreement — with myself. As Cousin Nathalia says, 'What cannot be helped, must be endured'. So — I learned to endure!"

"I think you're the nicest girl I know."

"Naturally. Never had a chance to be anything else!"

"Trina! I never liked you before, but — "

"Keep your *liking*. I don't want it."

"So-o — it's *loving* you want from me!" Meant tauntingly, it brought an amazing break in the girl's defenses, a look of confession, utter humiliation. "I — I didn't mean that, Trina. You know I didn't."

"*I* ought to be ashamed." She lifted the plain face, livid, its freckles grotesque, with a confidence new to her. "But I'm not. I'm glad you know, and that's all there is to it, except — " as they brushed against the newel-post nymph, " — thanks for the dance and — good night."

She disengaged herself from his arms and ran up the stairs. All about him were other faces, faces like those of Nanette Lane and Selma Rogan, faces whose eyes were saying: Jed Hadyn sure knows how to get rid of a wallflower when he's had all he can stand. How *does* he do it?

The night had grown cold and still. The sky was overcast but there was enough yellow lamplight from the rock cabin, reflected by limestone bluff, to guide the three men safely along its rim. They had put aside serious, even sensible, talk. It interfered with full enjoyment of grilled mutton chops, hash-browned potatoes, baked tomatoes, the "Lipscomb Special" corn pone and coffee blacker than any of their wives would allow to come on home tables. On the way up, they had retold jokes none of them had considered very funny when new. As often as not their laughter had been forced, the loud braying of men making believe they have kept the youthful blessing of natural, uncontrollable mirth about nothing at all. (Had any of their wives been privileged to look in, unseen, she would have recognized grown men acting like boys after a few drinks. Determined to show each other they were having a good time, they would all be much *happier* at home where they should be.) They did act like boys without giving a very good imitation. But too deep for pretense they did enjoy themselves, more so here than anywhere else. Here they did *not* have to keep telling themselves they ought to be having a good time. They had it.

"Isn't it a little chilly — to be wandering around outside, Calvin?"

"Sure is — that's why we're doing it."

"Exactly! What I been trying to get clear in my mind all night!"

"Better get your *head* clear first." It was Marshall shaking inside his plaid wool shirt and corduroy trousers. "You and those — oysters — ho! ho!" Calvin joined in. Obviously a certain incident of the night before had been brought up repeatedly.

"Them *damn* oysters! All I've heard today — not to mention last night 'after the ball was over'! But, seems to me, I got every blame one *helped!*

"You *sure* did! Calvin, I'd give a thousand dollars if you could've seen Nanette Lane's face when he 'helped' her. It paid me back for all the merchandise she's worn and returned for credit for twenty years — ho! ho!"

"Tell me more about Cousin Nathalia!"

"Well — first — she was setting there — all rared back in the pale gray crêpe yard goods I ordered for her special. She looked every inch the mistress of the plantation appearing for a minute at the slaves' Christmas party — Oh, Bill, kick my ass *hard*, will you?"

"Why? That was just the way she did look. I been wishing I'd served them oysters down her back last night, because I'll never get drunk enough again. Not at one of the Old Lady's parties!"

"Go on, Marshall. What'd she do then?"

"She asked real refined, 'A spoon, waiter — a *large* one!' Wouldn't raise her voice above the lady-level — and the po' niggers never did hear her. I 'spec' if Bill will look in that dining-room alcove when he goes home he'll find Miss Nathalia still there, whispering, 'A spoon, waiter, a *la-arge one!*' If Moira hadn't kept kicking my shins I'd've disgraced myself — *too!*"

"All right — all right!" Bill grinned with his head tucked down in paint-pony-hide coat, "Just keep right on enjoying yourselves. Say all you want to. Trina came up to me afterwards, told me to never mind, it had really made the party a success. Now — go on, bust your fool sides. Then maybe Calvin'll tell me what it was he meant over the phone."

"Oh, sure. A fellow was in the Bank, just been in Beaumont, says he thinks our leases are right where they ought to be to get the best play when Higgins finally gets ready to bring his well in."

"Who was he, Calvin?" Marshall asked.

"Oh, some wildcatter or other named — I wrote it down — "

"And you put more in?"

"Just a little bit."

"I'm just a poor, benighted storekeeper — but it seems to me you and Bill both plunged ass-over-ears months ago on this thing — "

"Listen to him, Bill. He's going to wish he'd plunged with us when we gave him the chance — "

"I *hope* so!" Bill stood, pillar-like legs far apart, a big man silhouetted black-on-black against the dark valley below. "But Marshall here may still be driving when *we're* walking."

"Getting cold feet?"

"Not *that* way!" He stamped vigorously along the white bluff's edge. "If I lose *all* I put in — which is every damn cent of cash I got saved up, I can always make more. And so can Calvin — so what the hell!" This was Bill's customary ending.

"There, Friend Marshall, you have the whole answer. If you want to come in, there's still—"

"Trying to get me to drag your and Bill's chestnuts out of the—"

"Just for that you *can't* come in. How 'bout you, Bill?"

"I'm staying!"

"That ought to hold him, although, confidentially—the man may be right!" Calvin and Bill laughed loudly. But Marshall could see there was uneasiness in them. They had been told they would know for sure in a few weeks—four years ago. Had sweetened the kitty a number of times since. But what was four years compared to the ten or more this fellow Higgins had kept his faith in the field alive? And look at him!

The laughter over the oysters came in renewed bursts, and then again. This could go on indefinitely. Marshall looked from one to the other, felt whiskey warmth leaving him. "Dishes don't wash themselves these days. Besides, I could be persuaded to take another nip. If you gentlemen will excuse me—" with as low a bow as full belly would allow.

"*We* ought to do the washing, Calvin."

"We sure ought, Bill, especially since we never have."

"And never will—even tin dishes cost money," Marshall grunted.

"Wish I had the strength of character to insist, Bill."

"Me, too, Calvin. But everybody in town agrees that Mister Lipscomb here does dry the neatest dish! It's an enviable talent—"

"Well, anyhow, I'm washing dishes. And you know what you two can do!" Had any clarification been necessary, Marshall's all-inclusive gesture would have provided it.

From the cabin, a sudden clatter of slamming tin pans, plates and cups soon began.

"What would happen, Bill, if a *china* dish ever got in amongst 'em by mistake, I wonder?"

"I don't!"

"Bill," Calvin rose to his feet to stand just behind him, right hand on the pony-hide shoulder nearest, "I'm sorry as hell about—last night."

"I know. It's all right, but—couldn't you have let me know—a little sooner?"

"I kept hoping up to the last minute she'd give in. She might have, if I'd stuck to my threat to go alone. Late as nine-thirty I still thought I could stalk out of the house without her—had been all dressed, since eight. At ten I put on my coat—and I think she took one step toward the dress I'd had Poppy lay out—but just then Lance came in, to tell us good night. He was in his nightgown—just like he's done ever since he could walk. She took him in her arms and looked

at me around his shoulder — It was then that I laid down my stick and hat, took off my overcoat — and phoned you. It must have been — pretty bad, Bill."

"It was. Hazel ought never to have bucked society — not in Sironia, anyhow. But after you got us invited to your shindig she couldn't wait to have one. For all her peppery ways, I hate like hell to see her humbled. Before some of the biggest old farts in town! It hurt me — something like I imagine Miss Milly's look did you. Women aren't just a different sex — they're a different — what-cha-call-it?"

"Species? *That's* putting it in words — something I've been trying to do for years — 'a different species.' If I'd known that when I married Milly — the grief it would have saved!"

"I served my time, too. I couldn't get it through my head for years that *my* logic and *her* logic didn't even *resemble* each other. Lord, the rows we used to have! That's the thing that'll always keep Hazel first with me. She says what she thinks and when she can't justify a word of it, she *fights* — hammer and tongs! She whipped me down good the first time — the first night we got back from our two-day honeymoon. I ain't even sure what that one was about. I remember saying I was through arguing with her because she didn't know what reason was. The next thing I knew she was all over me — like a mess of monkeys! Clawing and pulling my hair — man alive! Her father's property had had a lot to do with my marrying her — or *her* marrying me, like most of Sironia keeps saying — but by that time she'd been kicked out by Old Tom and there wasn't any property *for* her. But it was that night that I really began to love her. Even if — there are times it don't *look* like it, I've loved her ever since. It's folks you love that much — that you can't stand to see humiliated — even when they are wrong."

"You two were made for each other. About *Old* Tom and Hazel — did you ever talk to Marshall?"

"No. Why?"

"His father, Fred Lipscomb, was a crony of Old Tom's. Marshall might be able to smooth things out. I heard *Young* Tom tell him he's going to phone him real soon. Might be a good time to — "

"Take it easy! Me and Hazel — pardon *me!* Hazel and *I* don't want a *thing* he's got! If he — *or* that old coot, his father when he was alive — ever let go *any*thing, I don't know when — "

"*Old* Tom gave Marshall's father this place!"

"So I've heard, but I don't believe it."

"It's so. I was looking up an old deed from *my* father to Marshall's — the ground where Lipscomb's stands now. The County Clerk's new girl got down the wrong book, showed me the Lipscomb recording on this place. The consideration was 'friendship and a new

two-dollar bill.' We all mellow to some extent. Who's Young Tom to leave everything to if not *to* his own half-sister? I think it far from impossible that if approached the right way — by Marshall — a reconciliation all around might be — "

"Ungh-uh — you don't know my little wildcat! She's never admitted it even to me — but at least part of all this 'social climbing' is for 'Br'er Tom's' benefit. And while we're gossiping, you may have another load dumped on you, as head of the Hill clan — before long."

"Lance hasn't — ?"

"Oh, no. Lance won't ever give you any trouble, Calvin. It's Jed again."

"What *now?*"

"During the party last night he was seen taking a girl into what the niggers call 'Massa Jed's pokeberries.' They stayed there — 'just about long enuf.' It was the Lane girl. And you know Nanette."

"I didn't think I'd be surprised at anything Jed would do — after the times the estate has had to — 'bail him out.' His 'jams' have made quite a dent in his share, as you once guessed. But — for reasons which I can't tell you — confidential — I thought his plans for this girl were — very different. I'm glad you told me. This *can* be serious with Nanette like she is. Who told you?"

"One of the reliable niggers — rather not say which one."

"Chance of a mistake?"

"Don't think so." Red muttonchops tilted back meditatively. "It *might* not amount to anything. The — nigger promised not to repeat it."

"Think we can depend on that? Even so, I'm sorry — for a number of reasons."

"Me, too. Laurine's too smart and too fine a girl to take that route, but — " He shrugged his thick shoulders as he often did in discussing women. "I guess she knows where she's peddlin' her apples! But as 'head of the Hill Family,' *you'd* better be doing some thinking, all the same!"

CHAPTER 8

IT WAS THE WEEK after "The Elliott Hotel" house-warming. The Lanes' parlor was heavy with the smell of molasses candy. The "taffy-pull," which the *Sentinel* was to call "a jolly gathering of four couples," had been all Nanette's idea.

Things were going as she had hardly dared to hope. She just knew that this time Jed Hadyn was "serious." All that big dummy Laurine would say to questions repeated and pointed was, "Oh, *Moth*er!" That was enough for Nanette, quick to notice there was little left of the child's usual calm in "matters of the heart." At last!

A taffy-pull was perfect for the purpose. Nanette could be in and out of the parlor constantly on the lookout for "signs." Young people were bound to give themselves away sooner or later to a practiced eye. Since it had made no difference who the others were this night, she had let Laurine invite those she wanted. It had worked out nicely, *very* nicely, indeed. If *he* stayed after the others left, that would go a long ways toward determining what must be done. *This* was most certainly

not going to be another of that elusive young gentleman's romantic attachments which had been allowed to wither on the vine. The chief trouble with young love was it needed settling while both the parties were still — well pliable.

The other couples had been gone ten minutes or more and Jed was still in the parlor. When she peeped at Jed Hadyn, a slow, exquisite shuddering seized Nanette, almost like — like — Nonsense! Now he was fumbling around the buttered plate of taffy cuts — when he'd already crammed down enough to kill anybody else. Some mothers she could name would try to hurry things too much. Others would keep hands off, let him drift on as he had so often. She'd do neither.

"Mercy! Laurine, aren't you *ashamed* to leave all these sticky plates setting around. No, Jed, don't you help her one bit — that's woman's work. Sit down — and we'll have this place presentable in no time. My, what a pretty brown suit, Jed!" She felt his arm rather heavily, permitted just enough archness to creep in. All three knew Laurine had told Jed she liked him best in brown. It made his big brown eyes stand out. She'd given him this red cravat that brought out all the ruddiness under his tan. Laurine hurried out with a stack of plates. "What're we blushing for, Jed? You know I was just joking!" She had almost overdone it that time. "Quit cramming any more of that taffy down. See, I'll wrap you up some to take home and eat tomorrow — "

"Please, ma'am, don't — don't bother."

"Why it's no bother at all. It's just like old times — in a way. When Mister Lane was courting me, he used to say I made the best taffy of any girl in Reardon County. He always says the reason we've always been so happy — for this *is* a happy home, Jed — is our affection is cemented with taffy! But nobody could fuss with Stacey — and Laurine's inherited his disposition, I'm glad to say. Here — " She tucked the wax-papered wad into his coat pocket so that her fingers felt the lean hardness of his waist and hip, withdrew it quickly when she felt the dark brown eyes turn, wondering. "Don't tell Laurine I told you, but she made all the refreshments tonight — wouldn't let me help at all. She says boys don't like girls who can cook and keep house and sew, the things she loves most to do. And they don't! I'll bet you're like the rest — crazy about little flibbertigibbets who look pretty and think about nothing but parties and new clothes — "

"No, I don't — "

"Don't deny it, young man!" She smiled him into the family almost. "And don't let Baby know I gave away her domestic weakness, for she considers you one of her best — friends. We like for her to have boy friends: it keeps her from marrying any of these young scalawags around here who are *always* begging her to. Not that some

of them aren't excellent catches, but she's all we have, and we just can't give her up — yet. I don't care if it is selfish." She beamed impishly to underline the absurdity of anyone considering her selfish. "Always been such a joy to us! We couldn't bear for her to leave us until she's really grown. Not that my Laurine'll ever really leave her doting old mom and daddy when she does marry! Someday, of course, we want her to, want her to be happy — for, as I was telling Mister Lane the other evening, when Baby does marry, it won't be a case of losing her, but of gaining a son — one of the few blessings denied us!" Here she became as melancholy as her mirror had told her, frequently, she could by deepening her dimples and making her lips tremble. "We'll probably spoil him to death — Laurine's *far*-distant husband, I mean. Baby says she's going to marry a boy that just won't let me spoil him. What *can* have happened to that girl — I'll bet she's washing those plates to keep me from having to. What'm I going to do with a girl like that? Excuse me Jed — dear. I'll put a stop to that right now, I promise you." Smiling fondly toward the rear of the house she withdrew, the remaining napkins draped over one forearm.

Laurine stood in the kitchen, staring fiercely out the back window.

"Get on back in there! Mooning around out here — the idea!"

"Mother — really — it's outrageous — practically ordering me out of the parlor so you can — can make a sale!"

"Shut up! If he knew how you defy me, try to hurt me, show me *no* respect, you wouldn't have a chance of landing him! And now that I've got him in the notion, this is the thanks I get for it." She began to cry, or began to seem to cry.

"If you want me to say I'm sorry — I'm sorry! If you want me to ask for forgiveness — for anything — all right!"

Nanette wiped her eyes, which were singularly bright and not in the least red about the lids. "Mother will forgive you this time. Someday it'll come home to you how much you have hurt her. Now go on back to — your company and remember he thinks — for some reason — that you did all the hours of hard work for this party — "

"I'll tell him the names of the niggers you had in to do it — "

"You'll do nothing of the kind. If you have no — pride, *I* have! You conduct yourself exactly as I've told you — let him go so far and *no* farther! Don't worry about his philandering reputation. Most of 'em are that way at his age. There'll be plenty of time for us to get that out of him *after* you've married him. Fluff your curls on the left — hmmph!"

Laurine had disappeared abruptly toward the front of the house. If she hadn't, she might have said things that would bring on another of Mother's tantrums. Heaven knew, she wasn't a perfect daughter,

but she did want to be fair. Dad was the sweetest man who ever lived, but — oh, well, most of the other girls had something of the kind at home, although none had it nearly so — so — *unbearably!*

She stopped in her mother's room just long enough to place a double sheet of newspaper near its door that led to the parlor. Its warning rustle would be more than helpful.

She went back around through the hall and into the parlor. "Goo-ood gracious, *you* still here?"

"Where'd you think I was," he whispered. "In your room?"

"Well, of all the — If you're going to talk that way — you can just exactly leave right this minute." Then, pleadingly, "You going to bee-have?"

He bowed his dark head, and looked at her from under thick black brows. This look had never failed him yet. Nor did it now.

She felt her lips begin to widen in a slow smile in its way as depraved as his look. Busily she smoothed curling black up over her pompadour and down back in one thick curl that hung free almost to her belt. She was pleased with her tight-waisted, dark brown silk, its puffed sleeves and many little "gathers." "Was it *too* awful — tonight?"

"Not so good but what *we* can do better."

"I'll overlook the — the — innuendo."

"You do like *my* — innuendo, though?"

"Quit looking at me like I was a — a — never-mind-what!"

"All right, I won't *mind!*" He was coming toward her. She edged around the center table's fringed tapestry spread of faded Arabs going on faded camels some place they'd never get to. "Hey! Wait for —"

"I'm putting some of the butter cake in your overcoat pocket, Jed!" Nanette called from the hallway. "On the hatrack!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Lane — thank *you.*"

"Come in — Mother," Laurine said, while Jed made what he called his castor-oil face of objection. She knew a girl had to be nice to her mother or a fellow would wonder how she really was. "Jed wants to hear about the candy-pulling you refused Father at."

"No, thanks! Three hours of keeping up with you youngsters has worn me out. It's eleven-thirty, Jed. Laurine insists on getting up early to help me in the morning —"

"Yes, ma'am!" He held his large, handsome nose to show what he thought of "mother's helper." "But if I could just stay 'til eleven-forty-five?"

"Oh, all right — but not a *second* later!" She could be heard going to the rear of the hall singing "Oh, Promise Me." Oh, God!

"Jed!" Laurine slapped his hands away and went to the fringed old portières drawn over the door to her mother's room. She lifted them

apart to be sure the door was closed, then let them fall back in place.

"Had much trouble from that direction?"

"Aren't you ashamed? I was just being sure Mother wouldn't be disturbed by your big mouth."

"Any objections to disturbing *you* with it?" His arms had her surrounded. Lips settled down over hers, softly at first and then so hard they hurt. His feet began a slow waltz. She fell into step naturally until she felt his body feeling hers. She shoved him away with force that was convincing. "No, you don't, Jed Hadyn! Haven't you got *any* — sense at all?"

"Not when you force your attentions on me. Tell you what — let's you and me go for a ride. No? Well — come on over here. No, not that sofa — methinks its springs 'doth protest too much'!"

"Promise to behave?"

"I promise. Come on." One hand was busy.

"No! I meant 'behave' the way I want you to."

"Well — knowing what you *want* — "

"Jed, you're going home!"

"I take it back. I promise to behave just like Miss Laurine Lane of Three Hundred West Fifth Street tells me to. Want everything I'll do in writing?"

"Heavens, *no!*" She sat at the far end of the sofa.

He slid on crunchy springs toward her. She stopped him six inches away. "Well, what *did* you mean?"

"If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you. You're one of those people that forget whatever they want to."

"I'll never forget *you,* Laurine. I'll love you to the day I die — no matter what!" He had one of her hands, was interlacing his fingers with hers very — too suggestively. "No matter *what!*"

"The idea! You never loved any girl longer than a week or two. Folks laugh about it."

"You're not laughing."

"Sarcasm won't help any — even if you knew how to use it!"

"Why didn't you *say* you wanted to fight?"

"I don't. Take your hands *away!* I can't think when they're — "

"*This* is a time for *action!*"

"No!" She had said the word to him countless times, but never like this. He drew back. His puzzled look she loved so much had been replaced with his hurt look that went right through her. He *mustn't* know it. He'd look hurt all the time. "If you knew how silly you look — a grown man — when you try to — to pout! Never mind *that,* either! I've got a *lot* to say and not much time — " She pointed at the flowered china clock on top of high oak bookcase.

"All right — " He was on injured dignity now, and she felt herself

one great ache to stop what she was saying and give him anything he wanted — which was everything. If she had become nineteen only last month, she felt a hundred and nineteen now. "Jed, I believe what you've said — so *many* times. I believe you — you *will* keep on loving me to the day you die. Somehow I know it's true."

"Well, then!"

"Hush! I've felt like I do about you since long before you 'discovered' a month ago I was alive. Ever since I can remember — almost. I don't think anything could make me stop loving you — "

"Will you please get to the point or, better still, let *me?*"

"It's — it's that — maybe, it was the way you told me good night after the Elliotts' — or the way you kissed — the next time — or — I still know you love me, Jed — but I know *now* you *don't* want to — marry me!"

"Of all the crazy foolishness!" He reached for her arm, but she was standing now. "Sure, I want to."

"When?" Neither heard a rustle of newspaper. "*When*, Jed?"

"Whenever you say — "

"Tomorrow?"

"What's the hurry? God, it's not — ?"

"No, I'm not going to have a baby — not as far as I know, anyhow. Tomorrow?"

"Lau*rine!* People don't get married that way in Sironia — unless they have to. Think — how the family would — "

"Can't you think up a better *excuse* than that?"

"I told you I'd marry you — and I will. But I'm not going to be roped into — say, that *wasn't* the idea of — all *this?* Sa — ay!" Dark face had been slapped with force which left four-fingered imprint in white on redness. "I ought to be shot for asking that even."

"You *couldn't* have, unless — Jed, *why* don't you want to marry me now?"

"Damn it — I'll marry you — tomorrow, *tonight* if you say so!"

"But you don't *want* to! Maybe you don't know why — but I do. It's because a Hadyn can't *want* to marry 'a bad girl' — even when he's the one who — "

"S-sh! You'll raise the family and then — "

"Don't worry, Mister Hadyn. You'll get out of this — the same as you always have — "

"I said I'd marry you. What else do you want?"

"I wouldn't marry you — this way. Nothing could make me — "

"Fortunately, young lady," Nanette had flung open the curtained door, "there's some others to be consulted!" The black eyes in bloodless, dimpled face were those of a snake. "Sit down — both of you!"

"Leave, Jed! Leave *right* now!"

"No, miss! He stays here until—"

"Mother—please—!"

"So it's 'please' now?"

"We—I don't need any help. Jed—go—!"

"Laurine—I—can't leave you—like this."

"Very gentlemanly of you, I'm sure, *very!*" Nanette was leaning forward over the small table toward them. "And we can do with some gentlemanly conduct. And that's not all. She's a stubborn, hardheaded girl, has always been. Her teachers have encouraged her—told her she has intelligence—and character—and determination—encouraged her to—disobey her mother! I warned her about you, Jed Hadyn, because she's been a decent girl. But, oh, no! *I* didn't know anything. Well, I've known a long time what Hadyn men do—every time they get a *chance!* If I've warned her once, I have a hundred times. Oh, no, she knew better! Didn't know better than to throw her hat over the windmill for a—"

"Mrs. Lane!" Jed's voice came deeply, ominously. "You're wrong! Laurine and I love each other, and we're going to be married as soon as you and Mister Lane—"

"We are *not!* Jed, I asked you to go!"

"Listen, you fool." Nanette was a hissing fury beside the tall girl. "You're not going to wreck my life by disgracing me before—"

"It's no use, Mother. I wouldn't marry *him* if—if—I just won't, that's all."

"Well! You're the last one I'd ever'a' picked to have hysterics!"

"It's not hysterics. Jed knows it's not. If he won't leave, I will!" She ran out. From the rear of the hall came the slam of her door.

"Sit down, Jed—you and me can settle this. I must say you are acting like a gentleman, *everything* considered, of course." She moved closer patting his knee slowly in time with her words.

"I—I don't think there's much to settle, Mrs. Lane." He got up hurriedly. "I'm willing to—"

"*Willing* to?"

"I mean I *want* to marry Laurine—any time you all say. I'm sorry—about this. I'll go now—"

"Wait a minute! She said you know *why* she's refusing what she's wanted most for—"

"I don't. That is, I'd rather you'd get Laurine's reasons from *her!*" He was in the hall now, blindly picking up his short tan overcoat and derby. "Goodbye, I mean good night, Mrs. Lane."

"That's swee-eet!" Before he could stop her she had kissed him slimily. "Never you fear, I'll bring the young lady around all right. Good night—my son!"

The front door slammed so hard she jumped nervously. After

what she'd been through, who wouldn't! Happily she began straightening the parlor. It was late, but she didn't want to go to bed yet. Hill Family — that's what the Lanes'd be from now on! She'd handled the whole thing *just* right, from the Thaxton Party date on. Laurine would have come around by morning. If she hadn't, she'd marry him all right — if her own mother had to drag her to the altar by that long black curl every step of the way! And it'd be soon, too. Men's nobility in cases like this wore thin fast — mighty fast!

While the Lanes' taffy-pulling guests had been assembling, Marshall Lipscomb was brushing his sleek black hair. Moira was brushing his sleek black overcoat. The Store was offering the newer, lighter "Seymour" coats, but he had never considered changing, himself.

Tam swung on one pants leg over to the other and back.

"Where're you going, Mister Lipscomb?"

"Tell her, Tammy!" (Tam said, "To the moon!") "Any other questions, my dear?"

"You make me sick!"

"Well, if you still are when I get back, I know what'll make you well!"

"You wouldn't say — things like that to any of the fine Hill ladies!"

"Want me to?"

"Hmmph! You've been out someplace every night for a week."

"Up to the cabin one night and at the Store working on annual inventory the others — *as you know*."

"Still mad at me?" She had turned hot Irish-red in embarrassment.

"No. If there'd been any stopping you, that summerhouse business would have done it."

"Where're you going tonight, Mister Lipscomb?"

"It's not in walking distance, Moira!"

She came around in front, hurt by that, pleading in every line of face, dark hair and deep red shawl. He came closer, took hold. "Quit — Tammy's looking."

"Well — " He patted her underneath the shawl. "This afternoon old Cassius hobbled into the Store with a note. Tonight I call on Mister Tom Bly of Svringa — by request."

"What in the world you reckon he wants? Did he give you any idea? I won't sleep a wink until I know why. He's never invited anybody up yonder this time of night — any *man*, I mean. Reckon he's going to give us that strip next to the cabin? His pa give yours the other for no reason at all — " Suspiciously, "Leastways, you never gave *me* any. Was there a reason, Mister Lipscomb?"

"You know I wouldn't lie to you—about a thing like that!" The joking attempt was not successful. He chose his words carefully so as to speak truthfully, "No, Moira, my father never gave me any reason!"

"Certainly took your time saying so!" Somewhat mollified. "*I* wouldn't take a—a—a used postage stamp from that nasty old—"

"T-t-t, Moira! You're speaking of our richest gentleman-farmer!"

"*Farmer*, maybe!"

She watched him unhitch Old Blue from the shed post. The buggy sagged with his two hundred pounds then leveled off. She opened the backyard gate for him.

He drove slowly. "Young Tom" Bly had never been a figure of mystery to him. As boys, they had gone to the little schoolhouse near the South Wagon Bridge at the same time. *Old* Tom risen in the world—"perpendicularly," Jed had said—from overseer to owner, had taken Young Tom from the village school when he was twelve and hired a private tutor for him—just like Quality! It was because his first wife had been Hill Family (and "not just right in the head") Chrysée Storrow that he had felt her son should be raised as such.

Most Sironians (Marshall had been told many times) considered Chrysée's death in the early eighteen-sixties a blessing. Her mind, never strong—again, "The Reardon Curse"!—was becoming more "unsettled." Some had come right out with "Chrysée was going crazy anyhow—with no far piece to travel!" All had agreed Old Tom (not old then) and his wife had loved each other too much for their own good. All agreed it was typical of him to marry again so soon, and many said that his second marriage to the "dirt common" Aisla Jacobs had been "as much to spite the Storrows as for somebody to sleep with." Marshall's father more than once had told him that last part wasn't so. He would never have married anyone *she* could have considered a rival. One reason was a mother was needed for two-year-old "Young Tom." Had the plodding, conscientious Aisla been alive when her Hazel eloped with the supposedly worthless Bill Elliott, she might have smoothed the family back into shape, but with her death Old Tom had become again Chrysée Storrow's widower—not Aisla's. It had seemed ridiculous to most: Tom Bly having the gall to object to *anybody* as a son-in-law.

Old Blue, varying steady jog with something more like pacing, reached the base of Reardon's Bluff. Limestone-surfaced road began its curving rise. Marshall smiled: the lazy, mixed gait of Old Blue wouldn't satisfy either Bill or Calvin. They wanted fast-stepping, expensive animals. If Calvin and Bill wanted to live on a "tony" scale, it was their business; and if he, Marshall, who could "buy them both out several times over," wanted to live as his father had lived when he had next-to-nothing—well, that was his.

Only — he wished his two best friends wouldn't sink so much in this Jalloux gamble.

The last of the tall cedars bordering Syringa's entrance drive flowed past. As always, the great house, fifty yards beyond the carriage shelter, seemed to leap toward him from the cold gloom. Alpheus Reardon, its builder, had told his Philadelphia architect in 1800 that he was "sick of all-alike houses," and that his home wasn't to have "a single, solitary goddamned column." The problem had been solved by a boxlike red brick of three stories and many windows. It had a domelike roof reminiscent of Monticello's except for a flat observatory platform on top. In front, curving, divided steps with white iron railings lead six foot up to front entrance stoop. The "bottom floor" was really an above-ground basement. It was used for a kitchen, tool shed, food storage and gun room. (The affront to the "column school" of home design had been considerably relieved later, in 1841. In that year, Temperance Reardon Thaxton had inherited it, and added a becolumned portico to the "Bluff elevation" to overlook the town down in the valley.)

Marshall hitched Old Blue to a ring in the water trough under open-sided carriage shelter. The gargoyle iron knocker thumped flatly on fanlighted door.

"Evenin', Mistuh Marshall!" Old Cassius had opened the door, was bowing and backing at the same time. Lemon-skinned lankiness was taller, more cadaverous by candlelight.

"Evening to *you*, Cassius. Been all right?"

"Passable, suh, jus' passable." That was no lie. He hadn't been "all right" since he'd chosen to stay with the Blys when they took over here. Some said it was "stummick mis'ry," others that it wasn't no such of a thing. "Hit's shame eatin' like a canker!"

Cassius bowed him from the brilliantly candlelit oval hall of white-framed wallpaper repeating in many grays a panorama of Roman forum ruins, into the library. Walnut-paneled, it had a fifteen-foot ceiling and the dark reds of rug and deep-fringed curtains. Two kerosene lamps with red globes and a snapping, leaping log fire lit the *verde antico* marble hearth and mantel. Over it was still the portrait of Old Alpheus. Old Tom had held on to it with the rest. Alpheus was Young Tom's great-grandfather, after all. Glassed-over shelf after shelf of Thaxton-chosen (and Thaxton-read) books, the Blys had taken over. They seemed to have changed nothing. "Give 'em credit for knowing they'd do something wrong sure if they did," Milly had once remarked. It was a handsome room, and a comfortable one. Its warmth seeped into chilled body — slowly, agreeably.

"Cassius!" Young Tom opened the folding doors then closed them behind him. "Fix Mister Marshall a hot toddy. How are you?"

Marshall rose for the handclasp: The grayish fingers were almost as cold as his own. Something *was* wrong. But it must wait while the old Negro expertly blended steaming water from a copper pitcher beside the fire with lemons, with sugar and the fragrance of rum. Both toddies were handed to the tall, dried-up host who, by custom, served a guest his first drink. "Sip and savor, Marshall, as the saying goes. It's much easier to explain — *some* things to a man who isn't uncomfortably — sober. I'll need all your indulgence."

"You'll have it — what's left after this. My, it's good — and strong!" His eye caught the pair of pistols whose oiling and polishing had apparently been interrupted. "I didn't know there was a pistol match this month. Going to win the championship again?"

"Hardly! My doctor won't let me *enter* any more — doesn't even know I keep in practice — around the place. Damnation!" He took a high-backed chair of carved walnut upholstered in red velvet. Crackling logs, intricately veined green marble, dazzling brass, none of those things was more impersonal than their tall, emaciated owner. With the oath, he had applied himself to his toddy.

He was little more than a rack of sickly, grayish flesh for black broadcloth and yellowed but extremely fine linen. It was no secret that the way the man was living he must have an iron constitution to "dissipate" as he did and look only sixty — at forty-one. Invited "everywhere," wanted nowhere, he accepted all invitations, enjoyed none of them. He could have married "above" him, or "beneath" him, had never "had the time for either." No one but Cassius knew *all* about what he did have time for, *all* the women who visited here. On rumor's ever-receptive market, much about him was certainly distorted. But enough was known to prove one statement: The man was — in his own way and at his own expense — exhausting himself. Fortunately, no one except Old Cassius would mind.

"Have another, Marshall?"

"Not if I'm to remember anything."

"In that case — Cassius, finish straightening up in the morning. Go upstairs and help — my guest unpack. Then — er — lay out my riding things for tomorrow — and wait for me *in my room!*"

"Yassuh." Noiselessly he gathered up the used glasses. Two clean ones and a gilt-ornamented green Venetian glass decanter were left on walnut roller table at his master's elbow. "Good night, Mistuh Marshall."

He went out closing the folding doors to the oval hallway behind him. He shuffled his feet audibly across polished floor and up three steps. Then he ran soundlessly through the curtained door at the hallway's rear. Just in time! Mister Tom had opened the library folding doors, was looking out and all around.

With his knife blade Cassius lifted the latch Mister Tom had so carefully fastened on the inner side of the swinging door into pitch-dark dining room. He set the tray and glasses on the rounded shadow of table, and knelt by the crack in folding doors which led to the library he had just quitted. Mister Tom was just settling back in his big red chair dissatisfied-like. If he'd known *she* was going to show up he wouldn't have sent for Mister Marshall at all! Was he going to go ahead, anyhow? Sho' looked like it—

"It would seem to some I am overly suspicious, Marshall. But you should know eavesdropping is one of Sironia's industries."

Was that a sly dig at Moira? Never mind. Marshall nodded.

Withered grayness took another drink beyond its doctor's limit. "You always did have good sense, Marshall. I'm not flattering—just telling you *one* of the reasons I asked you up tonight. There are three, in all. First, I need a businessman I can rely on as—as my father did. Secondly, I want someone interested in seeing that my will is not broken. There may be some who will wish to do so. And, thirdly—someone to perform a rather delicate mission." He leaned forward, spoke earnestly. "As you know, I have no *friends*. Everyone I ever trusted sooner or later took advantage of my liking—some, of my trust—"

"I—I've heard so—also that you never try 'to get even.'"

"Why should I? What I valued was the supposed friendship and that was already gone—had never been, rather. They regretted being caught, of course, but not betraying—a Bly! Humiliating them—getting damages or even sending two of them to the penitentiary wouldn't have got back a thing I wanted. Any satisfaction derived from making them as wretched as they had me—*you* know the fallacy of *that!*" He shrugged. "My father gave yours—certain information he was supposed to pass on to you—when he felt he was not long for this world." Dry, cottony brows lifted in pointed interrogation.

"He tried to, had waited too long." Marshall halted. Tell now of the document which *had* "passed it on"? Better wait. "*You* want me to know—is that it?"

"I do. In strictest confidence, of course." And when Marshall had echoed his last two words, he continued, "My doctor tells me if I continue to—live as I do, he won't promise anything. And I am unwilling to live any other way. It *could* be only a year, might be fifteen or twenty. I can no longer postpone putting my house in—" From above came the mincing tap of French heels. Across the floor of his own bedroom? Leaden eyebrows raised sardonically. "My will names you my executor. Some—things must be made clear. You are to suggest any changes you deem wise. If any loopholes are left, a whole flock of ladies—some of them quite lovely—might descend

with claims of common-law wifery such as always plague an estate like mine. 'Mine ancient enemy,' Oscar Rogan, will be at their service! Is that look of yours one of pain — or envy? If the latter, nothing would be simpler than to have an extra lady visitor here, one who would most certainly please you — "

"Don't tempt me, Tom. I — er — pretty much stopped all that when Tam was born."

Gray brows lifted again, again came down. "Far be it from me to lead a youth of — *forty* astray. What're you looking for?"

"Paper. I always take notes on anything as important as — "

"No notes!" He slid a waxen finger around inside his collar and strode over to one of the wide front windows. "Just listen."

Marshall replaced the pencil in his vest. The room, the liquor and the talk were making him sleepy. He'd have preferred silence in all this walnut and red richness, its smells of old leather, of sharp woodsmoke and lingering hot toddies. He'd probably never before been so completely comfortable, so —

"Marshall, my father came on this place with absolutely nothing. His first job was chopping cotton for General Gabe Thaxton. That was in 1854. He had just come over steerage from County Galway. Barely nineteen, he was a hard worker, ambitious, too. At twenty-one — at twenty-one, Marshall! — he was already overseer for Elijah Thaxton, General Gabe having died in fifty-five. Two years later, he eloped with Chrysée Storrow, my mother. The Storrows wanted Elijah to send them away — *any*place. But partly because my mother was not — entirely well, and partly, I am sure, because my father was the best overseer in Reardon County, he kept them here. He built for them the cottage I later rebuilt for a granary." His recountal did not halt:

He, himself, had been born in 1859, a year before Little Teresa's death started all that *morbid* hair-combing by her mother, Chrysée's sister. Those two got along remarkably well considering Chrysée's "disgraceful" marriage and the fact no woman of good blood spoke to everybody she knew. So — that was the situation — dramatic or foolish, as one chose — of one sister genuinely happy in the overseer's cottage and the other in this barn of a house with plenty of everything — material, but with her share of The Reardon Curse sinking deeper and deeper into herself.

Young Tom cleared his throat and sipped from a glass he didn't realize was empty. "From here on, my friend, the story grows fantastic — unbelievable! It seems that — " The thin voice like two corncobs being scraped together ceased. Cassius, too, had heard something. It could be the wind at the library's hallway doors. Or someone just the other side of the doors who had lost balance, fallen lightly against

them. "As I was saying, Marshall," the dry-as-dust murmur continued as he rose from the red chair and circled stealthily to the right. He stopped speaking and sprang with amazing lightness to throw open the hall doors. Revealed was a crouching figure of luxuriant black hair flowing loose over filmy white garment by no means suitable for this weather, nor for below-stairs at any time.

Cassius' grunt of rage escaped notice only because of the other's excitement.

"Tommsy! Why didn't you *tell* me you had company?" A darkly beautiful little woman rose from her crouching position without embarrassment. Mister Tom had once said she'd look "like the lovelier portraits of Marie Antoinette — if they had spaced teeth." Mister Marshall was sure taking an eyeful of loosed dark hair about thin, delicate features. Too bad she didn't keep her mouth shut when she smiled, for the teeth were bluish, the front two unbecomingly parted. As all the Negroes on the place had agreed, her smile had evil in it.

"Quit glowering at me, Tommsy, and introduce me to your handsome friend. Or — if you prefer — I'll do it, myself. I'm Patsy Garrick — a friend of Tommsy's — no, you don't!" she almost snarled as she jerked her wrist from the gray-fleshed hand which had shot out to grasp it. Then all the contralto persuasion was back. "You're Marshall Lipscomb," she dwelt on the first name, "aren't you?"

"Patsy, how'd you — "

"Your first note to him is still in the wastebasket — or *was*. I can read, Tommsy, although at times you seem to think — not." She beamed up at Marshall a full foot taller. "I'm not — intruding, am I, Marshall Lipscomb? It's so spooky up there — all that old furniture people have been dying with for centuries. I didn't come here to stay scared to death half the time."

"Why you came, my dear Patsy, is self-evident. And Mister Lipscomb and I'll excuse you — to *complete* your toilette."

She sauntered languidly up to Marshall and looked all the way into his flushed face. "No wonder he didn't want me to see *you!*"

"Miss Garrick, you ought to be ashamed, embarrassing an old married man."

"You don't really think I'd do — that. And don't you mind Tommsy the least little bit. He didn't know I was coming when he wrote you. It seems I changed my mind. *You* know how it is, don't you — *Marshall?* And now that we've met — for the *first* time, I really must finish unpacking." As she swept out, Cassius saw Mister Marshall bite both his lips hard. Poor Mister Tom was fittin' to bust wide open.

There was the first color in Mister Tom's face in days as he watched her up the stairs and slid the hall doors together again. "I sent you word after she got here, but Cassius' grandson must have missed you on the way — "

"Suppose I come back after she's gone—home. She has one?"

"That depends on what you mean by 'home.' No, now that I've started,—I'd rather finish. As I was saying—the facts right here become—grotesque."

Listening intently, Cassius suddenly flung himself softly to the dining room's thick rug and crawfished back under the dining table. The swinging-door to the kitchen had creaked ever so lightly! Through it someone was coming, some fragrance rather, for he could hear nothing, see nothing. Between him and the gleam of light under the library doors was the nearest thing to a ghost he'd seen this year. Only this wasn't no ghost. She could hear what was being said in the library and Cassius could not.

She was there a long time—an hour and a half, anyhow. Sometimes she shifted a little, but never again did she lose balance as in the front hall. He would have left to try another post of listening advantage he had in reserve, but any move would have given him away. He didn't think this woman would mind using her little gold-handled revolver, making up some lie to account for it as an accident—or worse. She was little and pretty, had been here before, the evil-est one of all Mister Tom's. That was saying a whole lot.

When his arms and legs had long been dead with numbness except for occasional rheumatic twinges, he saw the white blur rise to its feet. This had been a strain on her, too. She slipped from the room more softly than ever he could have, closing the swinging door behind her. It was all he could manage to get his stiff old bones over at the doors where she had been.

Mister Marshall was on his feet, moving toward the hall. That was what had made her leave in a hurry. She had to be back upstairs, pretend to have been there all the time, when she was wanted. Mister Tom hadn't risen, was gazing through an empty toddy glass of ruby crystal. "Our conversation has surprised me more than it has you, but I haven't forgotten the—two *other* matters."

"I'm sorry!" Mister Marshall smiled sheepishly, was sitting back down. "Which comes next—your will or the 'delicate mission'?" Marshall lighted the cigar extended to him silently. "And—what did you mean, 'Returning to the subject of legal issue'? Not thinking of getting married at—uh?"

"Go on—say it—'at my age'! Yes—and No." Mister Tom spraddled his skinny legs on the hearth rug. "You have heard it said that I have never married because my Storrow side won't marry anyone the Bly side can get! Perhaps, that's true. If so, the time has come for compromise. By that I mean a wife who is halfway between what a Storrow should have and what a Bly can get—and who, although young and desirable, is for reasons we *won't* go into—willing."

"You mean—?"

"Let's not get too definite. One of tonight's — purposes is to ask you to deliver a message — when and in whatever way you think best." He stared politely at Mister Marshall, waiting for him to say he would. He did not.

"I'd like for you to tell a certain young lady-in-distress that she may have my name — for the asking — "

"Hadn't you better wait to see if Jed's going to marry her?"

"Nigger-grapevine says *she* won't. If she *would*, I suspect *he'd* find some way out. Hadyn men always have. If so — "

"What you do is your business. But I hope you'll leave that girl *alone*. I know of four who have accepted your — help. All four *later* blamed it for the loss of what little reputation they had left!"

"Did any of them claim to be thereby any the worse off — financially?"

"I wasn't talking about money. Just explaining why I can't do what you asked me to."

"Well, if you won't — you won't. I can send a note, as much as I dislike entrusting *anything* to writing." He gave the corpselike grin. "Now — about the other. A will *has* to be in writing. In fact, here is mine — in duplicate, *both* copies signed and witnessed. The original will be kept with my own papers. There have been instances of wills being destroyed — by displeased beneficiaries. This substitute will, also signed and acknowledged, is to be kept — sealed — in a *safe* place by *you*. It bears a notation that it be returned to me, if as is probable you die first. 'The Good,' you know! Refuse this, too?"

"Certainly not." Mister Marshall was sliding the blue-bound packet into an inner pocket of black corded-silk vest.

Mister Tom's crimped white hair rose from a deep bow, a Storrow bow: "A most successful evening — two out of three! Although you already — no, *because* you already knew and have for years kept what I considered my chief secret, naturally, you will be — compensated. How much would be right?"

Mister Marshall jumped up, his face red as a hog's insides, the way some whitefolks did when their feelings were hurt bad. "There is no question of — compensation!"

The white head was shaking as if there were no understanding what was going on. "No offense, Marshall — but I apologize. The Storrow in me should have known better, even if the Bly didn't. Sit back down and I'll fix you a potion you'll remember — that is, if you remember anything!"

"Sounds worthwhile — but if our business is wound up, home is the place for me. Tom, you don't suppose Miss Garrick's interest was — renewed?"

"No! I've kept an eye on the hall doors and — before you came I

was very careful to latch the one into the dining room just behind me —think it hardly fair to tempt my devoted Cassius!"

Laurine closed the Lanes' picket gate softly behind her. She walked briskly and determinedly down Aurelia Street without looking back. For the three hours since breakfast she had listened to a steady flooding of words: The very idea of a Lane saying she *wouldn't* marry a Hadyn! A certain young lady was in no position to choose! She'd better go down on her knees and thank God she had a mother who'd known how to bring a young cockerel to terms. She'd better get some sense in her head; she'd better — on and on and on.

Bright December morning filled her lungs with a tingling communicated to her spirit. She hadn't been sure where she was going when she flung on a light brown coat-suit and jabbed brown feathered hat on black pompadour with long pins, but she was now. It was true she was determined and set in her ways, but it was also true that she was only nineteen. Was anything — certain? Yes — she was *not* going to marry Jed Hadyn *this* way! She'd seen how it worked out with her best girl friend. "If this ever happens to you, Laurine, whatever you do — don't marry him unless he *really* wants to!" Laurine had listened and sympathized, vowed and wept — and now look! Didn't girls have *any* sense? Was it like Mammy Henderson had told her — a million years ago — "Honey, don't you get off'n to yo'self wid no man whut kin in-floo-ence you — 'til you's engaged to marry wid 'im — and not so ve'y fur off *den!* De good Lawd didn't make womenfolks fer ree-fusin'. He made 'em to uh-gree, so's dere'd be a wurld tuh ca'y on His handywuks. A gal can swar and swar she ain't goner — an' de nex' thing she know she done *is*."

That made her feel a little better; not much, but some. How long had she lain across her bed fully dressed, sure the phone would ring, that it would be Jed saying he was sorry, and *could* she forgive him? She would say no, that while she loved him, would never love anybody else, she knew the kind of a girl he thought she was and she had to keep her ideals. Then she would realize he — *Jed Hadyn* was actually crying over Laurine Lane, and — But the phone hadn't rung.

When she finally rose to undress, her alarm clock had told her not only it was four in the morning but that what was to become of her depended not on Jed Hadyn, nor on anyone else — except Laurine Lane, herself. She knew what most girls would do: Marry him and let Sironia talk. *She* couldn't. Time and time again Mother had told her she was *too* self-reliant, *too* headstrong, capable of riding roughshod over her own devoted mother to get something she felt herself

entitled to. All right, this was the time to find out and she was on her way to—

"Hello, La Beautiful!" It was that fresh traveling man who used so much talcum powder, the one who could make up such cute rhymes. He was standing on the low steps of the Bank. "I've been waiting here for *you*—Ever since Fourteen-Ninety-*Two!*"

"Well, Eyes of *Blue*—Goodbye to *you!*" She passed on by, chin up.

"Haw!" He fell in step beside her. "You *think* you got my number!"

"Yep—twenty-three!"

"Haw! Say—I like a girl with spee-rit. Say, ain't you going to stop and talk a little—the prittiest girl I've ever seen, can't *look* so kind and *be* so mean!"

"You're a case, Mister Heber Ted Mallin!" He was kind of cute looking—too.

"Well, anyhow, you remember all my names."

"Here, Bibbsy!" she called to the butchershop's brindle bull pup which came scampering across Main, nose wrinkling, all the rest of him wriggling. "I remember *such* names—easy."

"Haw! Say—when'll you be coming back this way?"

"Really couldn't say. Go-ood morning, Mister Mallin." She kept walking on up Main, but was feeling better than she had for—hours. Jed Hadyn wasn't the only attractive man in the world: A fellow like Heber Ted Mallin had been in every state of the Union. He thought she was pretty cute—and hadn't she laid *him* out! Funny, how much that helped her feelings. Still blue, she wasn't—well, desperate any more. Might just—just possibly come back this way in order to floor him *again*.

But the farther she got from Ted Mallin, the more the sudden soaring inside waned. By the time she had left the Opera House behind she was almost as depressed as when she had shut the gate at home. *Determination* was what she needed now to go through with what she'd started. Well, she had it!

She turned through the fancy iron gate in fancy iron railing and went up the wide gravel walk between sleeping crape myrtles. The cold air had her cheeks burning red. She had never felt worse, but she hadn't ever looked prettier. And that was going to matter—matter a lot.

"Come right in, Miz Law-rine." Old Fred was bowing the way his father and grandfather had to Thaxton guests for seventy years altogether. "Ri-ight dis way—into de *front* parluh. You feelin' all right, Miz Lawrine? 'Cose you is! I kin tell dat jus' by lookin' at you. Have dis cheer close by de fiah. I'll tell Miz Milly you's heah." He left, the very noiselessness of his slow gait making her feel panicky—unreal. Surely, Laurine Lane *wasn't* here in high-ceiled Thaxton

parlor, seated before its black marble fireplace to say — what she had come to say. Tall, heavy blue velvet draperies were toppling in on her, hiding the blue scenic design on cream paper, crushing the complicated blue and brown leaf-pattern on dark carpet. She *couldn't* have come here — deliberately! She *must* be out of her mind — must get out of this room before —

"Good morning, Laurine." Miss Milly floated into the firelit shadows. Had she always seemed so — stiff, so severe and yet so wraithlike? She couldn't leave now. She had a little time to decide on another reason for her coming, while Miss Milly shivering delicately shut the doors to the hall and those to the back parlor. The room closed, she took the needlepoint chair without arms at the other side of flame-lit black marble hearth. "Light brown is *your* color, dear. But every color I see you in seems to be!"

"Oh, thank you! I was just passing, and — " it was doubly hard to say anything after the disapproving way Miss Milly, in contrast to her complimentary words, was looking, "— and thought I'd stop by to tell you how much I — everybody enjoyed your this year's party. I don't think I ever had so much fun — "

"Very nice of you, Laurine. Not many young girls would call just to say nice things like that. Did *you?*"

She was about to cry: she, the headstrong, the determined, the self-sufficient! Well, she was going to be, going to *need* to be with this woman who wasn't her usual cordial self at all this morning. "I — I don't understand what you — "

"I meant it is *quite* clear you are — upset. If there is something you want to say *especially*, wouldn't it be better to — say it?"

"Why, ye-es, it would. I — I've been thinking — a great deal about — what you suggested the other day."

"*I* suggested?" High-corseted little gray bosom rose higher and still higher, as if it would never again exhale. "What *are* you — referring to?"

"The other day — on Main. You told me your plans for — Launcelot, and — suggested — " The other's sudden rigidity brought panic to the girl, panic that destroyed all careful approach. "You said you thought Launcelot and I would — 'make a handsome couple'!"

"I did? Oh, now I remember — a handsome couple on the *dance* floor! Go on — Laurine."

"Miss Milly, surely, you — " she was beginning to doubt her own memory, to shake and burn as if with childhood's chills-and-fever, "— remember it was — *more* than that!"

"Pull yourself together! This is neither the time *nor* place for — dramatics. You're overwrought. I'll have Old Fred drive you home and — and you can — lie down!"

"No — no, ma'am. I'm all right. Won't you tell me *why* — " here

the headstrong, roughshod-riding Laurine showed, "one day you practically ask me to marry Lance — and the next — pretend you don't remember anything about it. Why, may I ask?"

The other rose in genuine affront, even the rustling of gray silk menacing. "*Some* things shouldn't have to be put in words!"

Dark eyes lifted. Laurine's tongue strove vainly to keep pale lips moist. "I don't know — I don't think I know what you — "

"I think you *do*, miss! I am going to pass over the insult just offered by implication — offered to one of the finest young men who ever drew breath! You actually thought he would take — his own cousin's *leavings!*"

That last word (so hideously unlike Miss Milly) forced the girl to her full height gasping. Back were all the strengths that had so completely forsaken her. "I'll go now."

"Wait a moment! I can't excuse, but I can say I'm — sorry. There's to be a baby?"

"Certainly not! And — since you seem to know the rest — Jed Hadyn has asked me to marry him!"

"Nanette *has* been busy! This puts *quite* a different light on the matter. Jed should get married — while he can!"

Choked back just in time was what would have been blasphemy here. "But listen to me — I told him I wouldn't."

"No matter! I know — that is, can *imagine* how you have been hurt. There's such a thing as a girl's being *too* independent! If Jed is willing — as you say, we'll *all* rally to his assistance. You can depend on that. Since you aren't — since there is no need for unseemly haste, Nanette can have an announcement party — no, *I'll* give it. He's the only surviving son of my dear dead sister-in-law. That should put our local gossip-merchants on notice with *whom* they have to deal. Let's see now — this is the *what* of December — ? We'll let the holiday flurry die down. Jed will be most attentive *publicly*, put the whole thing on a — sound basis. *Then* I'll have the announcement, say mid-January. With everyone glad to have some place to go before Lent, it won't surprise me if you have *more* parties given you than anyone since I — "

"But Miss Milly, I won't have a husband that feels he's got to marry me, as much as Jed and I love each other!"

"Very — ahem! — but *have* you any — keeway?"

"Not according to *Sironia's* way of thinking, I don't suppose, but — "

"You simply *must* get some rest. But how can you at *home?* Come upstairs and lie down. I'll get Jed over and we three can work things out — "

"He'll think I asked you to. I can't — I *won't*, Miss Milly."

"Laurine, please!" The woman really wanted to be kind, now that

this had become a Hill Family problem. "Your father has a cousin in Mobile named — Something. Just a minute —" She glided impressively from the parlor and across the hall to her secretary, was back in seconds. "Here — is almost a hundred dollars. Take the early afternoon train to Mobile. You can rest in the cars. I have your cousin's name on my invitation list. I'll wire her you're coming. Stacey can stand up to Nanette when it's a matter of *your* welfare. You can stay in Mobile until Jed makes a special trip there to ask you to marry him. I'll get Nanette out of the way somehow long enough for you to go home, pack and get to the depot —"

"But, Miss Milly, Jed'll hate me and, in time, I think I'd hate him and myself, both!"

"Nonsense! And quit poking those bills in my belt! You can pay it back someday *if* you insist. It was downright providential the last rent money on the North Forty was left here instead of at the Bank this morning. Now, now, don't cry. And, above *all*, don't *thank* me. I'm glad now you came to me — even if I didn't behave very well at first, and am sorry. Heavens — look — on the front porch! Slip out the back way before —"

Too late! Miss Carietta had swept her light cream serge inside without knocking. From wide hall doorway she was looking from Miss Milly to Laurine and back. Never had Laurine seen a face so angelic, one so suffused with tenderness and understanding. It all showed in soft voice. "My poor dear!" She advanced to enfold the tall girl in a moving embrace, then turned back. "Millicent, leave me with this lovely child. I've been looking *every*where for her!"

Miss Milly seemed puzzled, then relieved. "I did want to send a telegram —" She looked significantly at Laurine. "As soon as I can get my carriage, I'll —"

"Take mine! I'll walk on home — really need the exercise!"

When the two were alone, Miss Carietta guided the girl, fully three inches taller, to the sofa which had two mahogany-rimmed tufted plush hearts for its back. She sat beside and facing her. "You and Jed love each other, my dear — but how *deeply?*" That was the way she began, almost the only part Laurine was to remember exactly. There could be no doubting her certainty she was right, her sincere wish to bring about "what is best for everyone," her courage in facing squarely the certain disaster of a marriage "where there can be no mutual respect." Of course, Millicent Thaxton meant well, but could *never* see more than one side to a question — but could be *so* obstinate! How very happy Miss Carietta would be if she, too, could see things that way, could *conscientiously* encourage Laurine as she could see Miss Milly had done. But no one knew better than she that Laurine was "too fine a person not to be hurt irreparably by later realization

of what you've done to ruin a young man of whom *so* much is expected, to bring dishonor to the Hadyn name — the Lane name, too, of course." There was much, so much more —

Meanwhile Miss Milly drove on in the Storrow equipage, assigning each of the buttons of her left knit glove to something she had to tell Nanette Lane. She'd phone — no, go by Stacey's office for that Mobile address. It would all work out beautifully, with Carietta to soothe the girl and Milly, herself, to attend to the details. It was right sweet, the way the girl loved that imp of a Jed, and her reference to Launcelot, Miss Milly saw now, was in reality a profound compliment. It was fortunate that the matter had been settled before Carietta came in, for sweet as she was if she had got that hard head of hers set against the marriage — well!

"Oh, my poor, *poor* boy-ee!" Nanette Lane was burrowing musty unkempt black head in Jed's bosom, sobbing loudly, holding him closely in arms that vibrated. "My son-that-might-have-been!" Straight that came from the paper-backed novel she had loaned Cousin Nettie, who had said the same damn thing! He couldn't jerk free or shove her smelly head away under the circumstances, nor could he have ignored her note sent at dawn by the first passing nigger this Sunday morning. (Although he *had* ignored Cousin Carietta's latest, delivered by Charles last night!)

"Hello, Jed." Mister Lane had, providentially, come up from the rear of the little cottage that had never looked as depressing as in this dim colorless light. He was the one in this house who was hurt. "Miss Milly's told us you offered to —"

"Mister Lane," obviously her plans for this interview did not include her husband, "we mustn't make it any harder for the boy-ee than it already is. You — go right on with — whatever you're doing!"

With not another word for the soft-faced, ineffectual little postmaster, she drew Jed into the parlor and closed the door. Here it was chilly, but stuffier than ever. The shades were half drawn and the old stove cold as a corpse.

"No — over here on the sofa by me, Jed. We're going to need each other!" He sat back as she loosed a sudden spate of pent-up anger and disappointment with no attempt at coherency: When Laurine had told him over the phone she didn't "feel like seeing anybody," she had already been packing. She had lied to her *own* mother! Told her *own* mother she was carrying out Miss Milly's plans for her to visit the Mobile cousins. Her parents had put her on the afternoon train. It wasn't until this morning that they had found her note saying she'd never intended going to Mobile at all. *Demanding* that her own flesh

and blood leave her alone, if you please! After she'd good as promised Miss Milly, too. For them not to try to find her — which could mean several things, all disgraceful. "Oh, that a child of mine should bring shame not only on her mother — but on a dear, dear boy-ee like you and all his fami — "

"*I'm* — to blame."

"Now, Jed — you did everything a gentleman could — once she'd ignored my years of devotion, religious teaching and warnings. Never in all my wildest fears did I dream it would come to — " She sagged against him wailing aloud, body-spasms shaking the whole sofa.

She must have realized he was about to get up. "Oh-o-o-oh! I had dreamed of how happy the three of us — four, that is — would be. I was going to work my fingers to the bone to see Hadyn Hill again so you could be proud of it — not like that sleazy Nettie Hicks keeps it. I was going to see that Little Nelia had a real home — might still, if you want me to — What's the matter, Jed, dear?"

"Nothing — not a thing!" What he had felt at the sound of Nelia's name on this woman's lips was loathing. "Have you heard anything — *since* — " He had to learn how much they knew — so he wouldn't make it any worse. All over town the way the thing was, it would get back to them soon enough — but not from *him*. "Since your note to me?"

She was thumping her head against his chest — just like a butting goat. It was natural she should be hysterical, but she might at least have taken a bath. Now she was off on another bid for assurances of regard and sympathy.

He loved Laurine. He always would. He understood why she'd done what she had. He felt for her now what he knew he never could have, otherwise. If she should come back — now — what would he do? With this same feeling still inside of him that had been the real cause of her leaving? No one would expect him to marry her — now. Not even Cousin Milly whose bighearted control of the situation had left her "flat o' her back wid de smellin' salts bottle in one han' an' a clean bath towel in de othah!"

"And everybody — wanting so-o to help — o-ooh!" To the head-butting was added a compound of sobs and wails. "All my dearest and best friends have been calling and sending word and — "

"How — how'd they find out so soon?"

"I do-o-on't know, Jed. I didn't tell a soul — naturally. Oh — I did, too. I phoned one or two of my closest and dearest. They'd never have forgiven me if I — they wouldn't repeat a word."

"It doesn't matter — " If that funky head didn't move off his shoulder he was going to knock it off. "Sit up. I'll pour you a glass of water. It's nice of your friends to want to help — "

"Devoted to me!" She had found herself sitting alone on the sofa

as he poured the water. "No, thanks, Jed, dear. I thought it was especially nice of 'Young Tom' Bly—"

"What'd *he* do?"

"He came by—no one ever knows how *he* hears things! Said we must find them and bring *her* back—that he'd help any way he could—" There was no concealing her delight at being the center of town interest. "He said he'd always admired me and Laurine, both—that one step—in the wrong direction shouldn't ruin a life. Jed, he same as said *he'd* marry her—even now!"

"Got his gall! You know his reputation."

"She's got one, too, now. And, really, can *you*—talk, my dear?"

His face was scorching. "He's old and—and eaten up with—I mean—If only we'd just gone ahead and got married!"

"Don't blame yourself, Jed. She's not worth it! Just you sit right back down here by—"

"No. I mean I've got a call to make, then—I don't know—"

"Stop it, Jed! Things ain't so bad but what they could be worse. Laurine'll come out of this better than most, you wait and see. Always, since a baby, she's known how to turn things to her advantage and she's strong *every* way. Mighty strong, for a girl. And, remember, she's got the money Millicent Thaxton gave her—to fall back on. Don't waste tears on Miss Laurine—she sure didn't waste any on the shame she was bringing down on her poor mother!"

A dazzling flash of light could have cleared the room no more completely. Nanette wasn't concerned at all over what might have happened to her daughter! Jed snatched up his hat. He knew now what he had to do. He'd hurry to see Cousin Carietta before she left to teach "Jesus' Sunbeams," her Sunday School class. Then—he knew now.

She met him at the front door of Storrow Manor—unusual, in itself—and led the way parlorward with heavy swinging folds of dark gray suit and still darker hat plumes. Plainly she was "cut to the quick" because he hadn't come immediately after receiving her note. She went to the marble mantel and from behind the large and hideous marble clock drew a sealed, but not stamped, envelope. "This is for you. Perhaps you'd better sit down."

She remained standing by the mantel watching, offering no explanation why she hadn't sent *this* note with hers. He recognized the writing on the envelope—"Jed," nothing else. Inside there was only:

> Dear Jed, The reason I am leaving the way I am is mostly so you won't want to find me. If I ever come back to Sironia, it won't be for pity *or* sympathy *or* help.
>
> You know I love you and I do believe you'll love me, like you said, "until the day I die."

Thanks for offering to marry me—I almost let you. It would have been the one way to kill what you feel for me. Remember me, Jed,

LAURINE

About to read it again, he felt the uselessness of it. He refolded the note, returned it to its envelope and sprang to his feet. He was leaving without another word.

"Wait!" The calm of the helpless-*looking* woman leaning against the mantel was—terrible. "You must know, Jed, that she was given money by Cousin Milly to go to her Mobile relatives until—" She shrugged, then went on, "But she chose to return that money—last night—and to leave town with a traveling man who (your Uncle Calvin found this out for me) has a wife and two children!"

"So I—heard. But she couldn't have known."

"She *did!* That's what she meant by leaving 'so you won't *want* to find' her. I, for one, am not surprised!"

"Because you—you advised her to run off with—"

"Certainly *not!* I only reminded her what would happen if she carried out your Aunt Milly's nonsensical plans, showed the girl—her duty. Running away with a married man was entirely *her* idea, I assure you. Thank heaven, we found her out—*in time*."

"I'm going to find her, and when I do, I'll marry her if she'll—"

"Sit down!" Again there was that—awful compulsion. It came both from without and—and from within him, the feeling that the Family was speaking through this fragile, inflexible oracle. "You're young, Jed—young, hotheaded and too tenderhearted to be allowed to ruin your life. Whatever else may be said—and a great deal will be—Laurine Lane understood *that*. It took only a few—truths to show her how wrong the Mobile plan was, how in time you would come to hate her as much as you *think* now you love her. Such hatred would beget in her a bitterness that added to her final admission of the wrong she had done you might lead to—another of Sironia's long list of—tragedies! Perhaps—the most sordid of the lot. What the Lanes have to be proud of—that's their business, but the girl is proud, and since it is you she loves most, it was you who could hurt her most. Some girls would have welcomed the chance to marry you and ruin you—as a Hadyn. That she didn't is, of course, in her favor—decidedly. She's gone because she *wanted* to go—and in the way she wanted to go."

"It doesn't matter. I'm no—"

"Jed—" She advanced to stand over him, as if crises of this kind were a matter of daily routine. "Sit back down!"

Chin jammed down into overcoat collar, he stalked toward Hadyn Hill. December wind rising was no colder than the pressure about his chest. Never before had he been so completely wretched. Self-recrimination returning was made sharper by what had just been shown him unmistakably—about himself.

Cousin Carietta had done this, because she could do no other. Nor he! When she had said, "Someday you'll thank me, Jedediah," he hadn't been able to put the denial bursting inside him into words. He could *still* leave—only—

"Oh, hello, Lance!" Relief was great. Probably the only human on earth he didn't mind seeing. "What you doing out so late?"

"It—it's not late—i-is it?"

"No, I just said that without thinking."

"Uh-hmm!" Lance agreed brightly, then almost pleadingly, "You can come with me, Jed, if you want to."

"Not today." Then remembered was the poor makeshift Lance's life had been, would always be. "Thanks, glad to! You lead on. Which way?"

The other's head shook. "I just walk. That way I never know what to expect."

"Don't you ever get lost?"

"No-o. When I begin to feel tired I just stop and—look around and find I'm only a *little* ways from home!"

"Well, now, that's the best—system I ever heard of. Been fishing lately?"

"'Most every day."

"Catching anything?"

"I—I wish I didn't forget *how* to remember. I try—and sometimes I do. For one thing, she—she was talking about you—this morning—about *you* and—a girl—"

"Me and a *girl?* Surely not!"

"Yes! And there—was—some more. Mo-other was mad at Cousin Carietta but said she might be right—'about Jed and Trina.' What'd she mean?"

"God knows! I—I got to be getting home. Walk with you some other time!" He turned up through the familiar iron gate, did not slacken pace until he'd reached the front door. He let himself in, in four steps had a foot on the bottom stair step.

"Je-ed! I want—to see you!"

Damn! If he ignored Cousin Nettie, it would mean another session of whining blame. "I'm pretty tired, Cousin Nettie—"

"Cousin Nettie understands. I'll put dinner off a little. You run along upstairs for a little nap. I've got your room nice and warm."

"Thanks, Cousin Nettie—thanks a *lot*." The old bale of hay was being reasonable for once. Maybe, she *was* doing her best to make a

home for Nelia. He hoped so, for one thing was certain: Since he wouldn't marry Laurine he couldn't marry any other woman.

His cupola room *was* comfortably warm from the fire in its small coal stove. It must have been going for some time. Thoughtful of the old girl, even if he couldn't sleep in a room this hot. He threw up a window and closed the damper. As for some time now, he automatically reached below the inner knob of his door. His fingers, already turning, found no key. He looked on the floor, then under the loose edge of matting. It was a long key not easily lost. Funny! He started to set a chair under the knob when the ridiculousness of it struck him — Jed Hadyn protecting his "Maidenly treasure"! Thumbing his nose at himself in the mirror he stripped off his clothes, pulled on the long white nightshirt split up the sides, and slid himself between sheets almost as warm as the room.

At last — the worst morning of his life was ending. He'd pretend he was Lance and forget how to remember. He must forget Laurine. And Cousin Carietta and, most of all, Mrs. Lane! Wonder where *they* were by now. Wonder if she was saying *his* hair was "gossamer soft" and *his* skin "smooth as warm ice." Wonder would she tell *him* where she liked most to be kissed — and the next-best. If she'd pretend she didn't want to hear some things he said so she could smother them with her own parted lips. Wonder if —

"Je-ed?"

"Yes, Cousin Nettie?" O-o-oh, hell!

"I — I heard you rolling and tossing on these old springs 'way down in my room. I just can't bear for you to have to fight all this out by yourself — like nobody cares a thing about you."

"Thanks — but don't bother. I'll be all right in a —" Good God-a-Mighty, the old pot of suet was inside his room — again. He turned his back to her. "I don't feel like talking *now*."

"You poor boy! Trying to bear up under what that awful girl's done!" She was not only inside the room, but one side of his bed was sinking with a loud scrunch of springs, sinking all the way down to a side-board! "Cousin Nettie knows you didn't mean any harm. You can't *help* being attractive to women. It's them ought to let *you* alone."

"Please, go, Cousin Nettie. I'd rather not say *anything* about —"

"'Course, not!" She patted his upper shoulder until it withdrew so far she almost toppled across him. "But time and Cousin Nettie can fix things up — good as new. All youngsters have their — little troubles. Anybody that don't know that and make allowances is just plain unreasonable. It's us women — us *good* women who lack understanding most of all. S-sh, Jed! *I* know you're even — high-spirited-er than most. You just got to — cut loose. I worry about you. Last night I asked the Lord to show me how to comfort you and He —"

"Thank you, Cousin Nettie — but — don't! I'm not worth it!"

"S-sh — that's *just* what I meant. Feeling this way, you're liable to do — something terrible. It's nothing but luck your whole life ain't been spoiled chasing after — "

"Don't!"

"All right, Jed. You know what I mean. With your — hot Hadyn nature, your luck with *that* type can't always hold out — "

"Right now I feel like I never want to — to *touch* another — "

"I didn't mean that. Some things are just as natural as breathing to a lively young un like you. You got to be more careful than most, though. With every gal in town anxious to be a Hadyn and some not caring *what* they have to *do* — like I said, your luck can't last. Until you can find a girl that's — worthy of you, you've got to be *extra* careful. Got to find some — *way* — to — Nobody expects you just to quit — uh — all such. Know what I mean, honey?"

"Yes, I know. I can — get along — *fine*. Now, please, leave — "

"No, Jed. It might even — wreck your health! You're the kind that can't — do *without!* And that's why — no matter what the sacrifice — what the misery to me — I'm willing to do whatever I can, no matter — "

"Thanks for — whatever it is you're going to do. Only — please, go!"

"But, Jed, dear, I can't help — if I *go*. Don't you understand, honey?" One of her clammy hands had slid under the cover, and pushed quickly down inside the open neck of his nightshirt, pushed farther to reach one nipple, pinch gently.

Young face dark against white pillow writhed about incredulous eyes. She was *crazy!* Good God! He jerked her hand from his shirt. As she tried to thrust his down between her huge sloppy breasts, he jumped out the other side of the bed. "Get out — get out of here, you goddam rutting bitch!"

"Now, don't get excited, honey. I begged the Lord *not* to *make* me when it first come to me that this was how I could help. But He *insisted*. It'll come to you, too — it's the *only* way! And then when the right girl does come along, you'll thank me for saving you for — "

"You don't — " He backed against the open window, wintry gusts slapping his only garment against sturdy, winter-white legs. "You don't know what you're — "

"Why, yes, I do, honey!" The oily voice was calm, horrible. "The Lord told me you'd be bashful, but not for long — " She had sprung at him, hooked fingers in the V of his nightshirt and torn it completely open, had one arm around him pressing, pressing hard, breathing gusty, meaty sighs. Sick, crazy, it didn't matter! Another wave of disgust and he'd throw her through the window, glass, sash and all.

He caught the wrist in front of him, forced it up and then twisted it back between her shoulder blades. She had to swing about to keep it from being broken, and with his body he forced her to the door so that a final shove flung her to the floor at the head of the stairs.

Just in time he slammed the door and got a chair under the knob. Heavy body smashed against the other side. There was hoarse breathing, hardly human. "Let me in — let me *in*, Jed, I *got* to see you. You don't know how it is with a good woman cut off — all-a-sudden. Let me *in!*" She was crying, sliding down the door to the matting. "I can't *stand* it, Jed, can't. Please, Jed, please — have *mercy* — !"

"I ought to *kick* you off the place now. You'll leave the *first* thing after dinner — you old slut!"

"Slut? Hmmph! Fine one to be talking. If there ever was a slut-maker, *you're* it! You won't be putting *me* out. If you try to, I'll tell everybody in town what you just *tried* to do, tried to rape your own cousin — that's what — a self-respecting woman. And the town'll know *who* to believe — "

"I don't care — "

"Sure? It can't hurt *your* reputation none — but'll be a fine thing for — Nelia to grow up to!"

"Nelia!"

"Stopped kind of sudden, didn't you? Jed, darling, nobody'll ever be nicer to you in more ways than me. You just don't know — yet." And after a silent interval, she added, "Take your time, honey. I don't aim to hurry you — "

"S-sh — might hear you down in the nursery. If we — if I do let you help me — you're sure to be sorry — after — "

"No, I won't. Just you let me in, sweetheart — you won't never be sorry, I guarantee."

"But — just suppose — Mrs. Lane ever — heard! You know how she is — "

"I can attend to *her*. Jed, if I made you mad — with what I said, I'm sorry. We'll forget all that — easy enough. *That's* my boy!" with the scrape of the chair being withdrawn from under the knob. Fleshy arms rose. Puffy lips fell apart, tongue moistened, she flung herself toward him.

Jed sprang past her. "I got to think about it!" He took the stairs by leaps. Overcoat flapped about trouser legs, the slapping of unlaced shoes.

Down high front steps, down front gravel path he ran to the street. Sweat streamed from skin soaking the nightshirt under suit and coat.

In front of the closed High School he slowed. Church not out yet. He stooped to lace his shoes. What had been chiefly an undeniable impulse to get out of the same house with her might prove to be the

wisest thing he could have done. At least, he could think now.

Not for a second did he doubt that she would do what she had threatened, once she was sure he wasn't going to do as she wanted him to. Even if he was willing, he couldn't. What *could* he do? He held to the High School fence. Every possibility, every one of the people affected took his turn before him. What way *was* there? Running away had been the solution to many a one. But that would leave Old Nettie in charge of Hadyn Hill — and Nelia — and telling her lies without any interference.

At least, he was able to think, had found *one* way. Not as bad as Old Nettie's was all he could say for it.

He combed overlong, black hair with his fingers. It was no satisfaction that with only the low-cut nightshirt under his coat and no hat he must look even more "Byronic." He was a — a skunk all right. He laughed, as a Hadyn didn't laugh very often. It was low, bitter, a laugh of self-disgust.

Past Storrow Wood he hurried, then turned off into shadows of high oak trees and house-high evergreens.

He was hidden in the thick shrubbery when the two women returned. They were strolling slowly, the way womenfolk seem to only when they've been to church and know what's waiting: dinner to dish up — "from the sublime to the sink," as Jed, himself, had once said. Had there been a time when he felt like saying such things?

Lanky, dour-faced old woman went on it. The girl had stopped, as if seeking just any excuse for not resuming her dull life inside. She reached up to break off a withered twig of ligustrum over the steps.

"Trina!" Her high-collared, black coat trembled all over at his whisper. "Trina — go back toward the gate — "

Without a word she preceded him. At the gate he made himself look directly into the plain face, free of all powder in weak December sunlight. "You've heard, Trina — about Laurine?"

She nodded. "I'm proud of you, Jed, for — offering to — to — Cousin Milly's furious, but I think — down under — she, too, thinks it was — best. You — you're here to make your peace with — ?" She nodded in toward the cottage.

"No. It's to stop something that might — might be the worst thing the family's ever had to face."

"Jed, what've you — ?"

Side by side they had begun to move along the street's graveled walk. His deep, angry tone caused her to draw deep into the dingy black coat, deeper into its high, intricately braided collar, as if — as if what he was telling her about Cousin Nettie made her colder, far colder than the chill air ever could.

Now he was finishing. "There's only *one* way to get shed of her — *and* keep her mouth shut! I've told you the whole story — everything! I've treated the family — *mighty* bad. Now I want to save them from — from — Trina, will you do me the honor of — of becoming my wife?"

CHAPTER 9

MAMMY HENDERSON sat out under her chinaberry trees. She did so not because it was warm enough, only two days before Christmas, but on a whole day-off she wa'nt goner stay "cooped up." From her post she could keep an eye on the children. There was Luella, the oldest child of her own Lilybeth, and a sweeter—or blacker—angel never drew breath. In some ways she was Mammy's favorite grandchild. (In some way each of them was.) At seven Luella was "fat as a butterball" and just as amiable, never complaining like her maw, Lilybeth, had done. Just look at that Luella child now—playing hide-go-seek with the five-year-old Jared, half-white, and the two two-year-olds, white Nelia and cinnamon Leah. She'd let them catch her every time. A frown settled on Mammy's flat ebony face. It wasn't a good thing for a child to be too sweet, like Luella. Somebody in this world was bound "ter take disadvantage of 'er." With Luella so foolish about bright rags to tie 'round her fat little body and fuzzy pigtailed head she might turn out like Lilybeth, and Mammy

sure didn't want another Lilybeth in the family! Not that her Lilybeth was really low-down. She had to like a man to "go wid him." But she was always liking somebody different, except, of course, Jared's pappy. Reckon he was about the only one Lilybeth had ever kept on liking. But whatever might be said about Lilybeth, she didn't never really go with more'n but one at a time. That was something *these* days. Just look at some of de white folks — Lawdy God!

"How're you, Mammy?"

"I'se fine — Mistuh El-yutt!" She grunted up and ambled toward him. "Didn' hear you whin you driv up. Guess I was wanderin' in mah — "

"Whoa!" The team of tight-reined grays were about to back the light trap into the dilapidated picket fence. "They just can't stand still. Your mind off 'wandering' with the bride and groom?"

"Mought'a'bin. He's one o' my fave-rite babies. No mattuh *what* some says, dey ain't no sweeter boy in de country'n' Marse Jed."

"Nobody says he ain't — 'sweet,' Mammy. Some do think that maybe he oughtn't be so — generous with his sweetening."

"Hyah — hyah — hyah! Oughter be 'shamed to ree-peat sech as dat? He sho' *is* wild, bless 'is heart. But he'll settle down now — leastways, I sho hopes he do!"

"Doubtful, Mammy?"

"Yes, I is, Mistuh El-yutt. Miz Trina's de nices' and de bestes' bee-haved in de whole fambly. She means well an' — tries hard, but I — just — don't — know."

"Well, anyhow things got off to a good start. Miss Trina looked almost pretty as a bride and — Mrs. Storrow sure knows how to put on a wedding!"

"Dat she do! Jus' tell Miz Ca'ietta who's marryin', when and whar at — denn get out'n her way — quick!"

He laughed loudly. "What I started to say was that in spite of — everything it's a good thing, ain't it?"

"In *mo'* ways 'n' one!"

"You wouldn't be meaning dear Miss Nettie, would you?"

"Hyah! hyah! hyah! Did *she* up an' leave in a fluster! Didn' say goodbye to *no*body. Nelia'n' me laffed an' laffed."

"Now, Mammy!"

"Nelia know! Her an' me hated dat 'oman. Don' ax me all I knows 'bout her, or I might tell yuh. Mistuh Jed didn' come inside de house frum de time he lef' out dat Sunday mawnin' 'til *she* had went. But dat precious Miz Trina wasn't 'fraid of 'er, no, *suh!* Though she did tell me ter preten' ter be dustin' de furnishuh in de par-luh *all* de time she were tellin' Miz Nettie in de *nices'* way to git out — vamoose!"

"I'd wondered about that, but wouldn't think of asking. Men don't gossip!"

"Whut dey call deyselves doin'?"

"No-ow, Mammy! I'm due up at Syringa in a few minutes. I thought maybe Nelia and—the other children would like to go along."

"Dey sholy would! Just as soon's I git 'em cleaned up a—"

"Let them go like they are. Kids don't enjoy themselves all spruced up."

"Little gals does. But you's in a hurry. Heah, Lu-ella, take Nelia an' Leah an' Ja'ed an' Bennie out back, so's you all kin be took aridin' by Mistuh Ell-yutt."

"Goody, good-ee!" Stocky little Luella was bouncing her fat up and down, round black face agleam about shiny teeth and enormous white-balled eyes. "Wondah is he got candy in he side pocket—lak de las' time."

"Lu-ella! Is I gotter spen' dis heah holluh-day aftuh de weddin' beatin' some mannuhs back into you? Take dem chillum—you knows! Yo'se'f, too—"

"We's ready *now*."

"You is *not!*" Sternness relaxed as Luella herded the four, all younger than herself, toward the small outhouse lopsided under many years tangle of dead morning-glory vines. "You's spilin' dem chillun, Mis-tuh Ell-yutt. But hit's hard not ter."

"That's right. I feel good all the rest of the day when I've had 'em out. A youngster gets pleasure out of anything and everything, makes me ashamed. Grown people mostly want what they can't have."

"Dat's de Gospel trufe! I wouldn' wanter live widout a mess of chillun to kiss an' spank an'—an'—clean up aftuh!"

"Well, by the looks of things, you won't ever have to. How many *have* you raised?"

"I don' rightly know. Looks lak I no sooner gits one batch what dey can button deyse'ves dan dere's annuder batch howlin' and kickin' in dey cradles to be took-up. Sometimes I thinks I'se 'titled to some res'—but once when I had it, I didn't like it."

"What ought I—er—Jared'll be six in about a month or so—what's he want for a present? Heard him say?"

"Done say so many things I fergits. Hit's mos'ly a sto'-bought collah fer Mustard." She pointed to the tucked-under, wagging hind end of a low-hung, yellow-brown hound pup. "You's sho' good 'bout rememberin' buthdays, Mistuh Ell-yutt."

"Not all memory, Mammy. I got 'em all written down to keep from playing any favorites. Jared need any clothes?"

"Evuh see a boy whut didn't? But I kin make whut he got do a time yit."

"And some say all Negroes are lazy!"

"Near'bout all *is!* I ain't *nevuh* bin. Miss Tempy — she were Marse Calvin's gran'ma whut died when I was a chile and her body-suhvant — done say to me, 'Polyphemia — ' nobody but her evuh called me by my full name. She'd named me. 'Polyphemia, remembuh whin you stays idle you stays on-happy. *You* keep busy yo' whole life long. If'n dey ain't nothin' ter do — you look aroun' an' find sump'n'. I done proved hit to mah own satis — well, hit's 'bout time! Keepin' nice Mis-tuh Ell-yutt waitin' all dis time an' jus' talkin' when men hates gossip — hyah! Lu-ella! Did dey, *all* of 'em?"

"Yes, Mammy. I'm a goner set in de middle dis time — I means, kain't I, Mis-tuh — "

"You'll set whar you's invited! Nevuh seed such mannuhs — you know Ja'ed always sets next to — "

"We'll fix that." Bill was pleasantly flattered by the chunky little black girl's adoration. For barely a second he let his arm fall around Jared. "Today we'll let Luella sit on the outside — and drive. I'll sit next her — in case she gets tired, and then Jared next to me and Nelia and Leah and Bennie on the bottom so I can hold them in. How'll that be, Luella?" He handed her the reins.

"Me goner dri-ive? Oo-oo-oh! I bettuh git Nelia's bonnet fust." She jumped out and ran, yelling back, "Leah Smi-i-ith, stop wipin' yo' nose on yo' dress!"

"Dat Luella is jus' too sweet fer dis worl'! Hurry up, honey-sugah!" As she came tearing back to the broken place in the old fence where the children were being loaded in, a woman followed her to the cabin door, and leaned there, her thin blackness in plaid calico obviously thickened.

"Oh, hello, Lilybeth."

"Good evenin' to you, Mis-tuh Ell-yutt." Low, soft, drawling was musical and pleasant. All personal interest was kept out of it.

The well-loaded trap moved off up River Road, little hands waving back at Mammy from all sides of Bill Elliott, no two pair of them the same shade.

"He's sho' good to dem chillun. 'Shame 'bout Miz Hazel. He's de kind oughter have a dozen runnin' round de place, and mo' growin' up all de — Lilybeth, you oughter be 'shamed. In dat skimpy dress anybody kin tell 'bout you. I bet Mis-tuh El-yutt noticed."

"Why you reckon I come out?"

Ever since he had forced Milly to invite the Elliotts, Calvin had sought a way to regain what had been lost. Even Lance was beginning to look up vaguely questioning when they exchanged remarks of such emphatic mutual consideration. Her firm stand not to go to the Elliotts' on December 6 had helped but not enough. Christmas might. There was something she had wanted for years. She hadn't insisted because with all the other things she had, it was undeniably an extravagance. Suppose he surprised her with it? Might not she be as anxious as he to forget certain matters but, womanlike demand a suitable excuse?

Jed's wedding had helped pave the way. Milly had worried about the boy. That Cousin Nettie matter was now so completely effaced it would never be mentioned again on any of the Hills. Even Laurine's unfortunate elopement had had some good results. It had stopped Milly's thinking she might make a match between the girl and Lance. Not that Milly would have gone through with it—certainly not.

To Calvin, there was something rather—splendid about a girl's preferring disgrace, and the Lord only knew what else, to marrying the man she loved because he didn't want to marry her. Was there another girl in the world who would have made Laurine's choice? Calvin doubted it. He wished he could help—wished she hadn't sent that money back to Milly.

And while he was wishing, what was the best way to plan for Lance's future? What could await the boy but ultimate unhappiness? The task of Milly and himself was to insure Lance's future in every way they could while they were here. It was telling on Milly. Buying that unnecessary present just now, with the oil rights tying up so much of his capital, would be *gross* extravagance. But, damn it all, Milly should have her new brougham!

It arrived on the afternoon freight of December 23. It was uncrated and assembled in one of Bill's lumber sheds for complete secrecy. The first Milly saw of it was when their own team of blood-bays, Manassas and Shiloh, trotted up the crescent drive of Thaxton Hill the next morning, heads as high as any Thaxton's had ever been. In weak, flattering sun rays it glittered and shone. All black outside, it was mostly thick gray plush inside shining black wood and heavy plate glass. No part of the equipage gleamed more brightly than the purple-black face of Old Fred. Enthroned on the open front seat, he wore his coachman's dark frock coat over his work pants. His black stove-pipe hat had begun its useful life in the wardrobe of General Elijah, dead these twenty-two years.

Miss Milly showed more delight than Calvin had seen her evidence since the day of the doctors' final consultation about Lance. Had he

known it meant this much to her, he would have ordered the fool thing months ago. She embraced him — in front of the servants: a landmark in their life together. Admiringly she walked around and around her gift.

Soon it was to become a sort of "trade-mark" and so be regarded by the town. Anyone could tell blocks off she was coming and how she would look when she passed them. She would be sitting erect, priestess-like, glancing neither to right nor left. Little of herself would be visible between heavily braided cloak or coat and generously plumed hat. With a silver-holdered pencil she would make constant little jabs at a pad from her reticule, a sort of bookkeeping of calls owed and paid, shopping done and to be done, and — not infrequently — rumors to be verified. No one knew when the new conveyance received the name it was to bear all this first part of its long and varied life: "The Show Case." But no one was in doubt about who had so christened it, nor had there been would Hazel have left any room for uncertainty about her authorship.

Milly took *two* "trial spins" that first morning. It was not until later the same day that "The Show Case," not yet christened, was officially — and sensationally — launched on a career which was in so many ways to parallel that of its owner.

About four P.M. this Christmas Eve of 1900, "The Show Case" rolled down one side of its curving drive between gaunt crape myrtles. Light sparkled and shimmered from every angle and every spoke, from glistening paint and polished glass, from sleek, heavy-muscled bay rumps and from driver's proud white teeth. "Hadyn Hill, Fred!" Turned left onto dusty Main Street, they headed toward town.

Miss Milly sat in state, high-corseted, in wine velvet cloak and wine-shaded willow plumes. In an ice pack of Christmas gifts to be distributed, she was already at her eternal sterling-silver pencilings. She could have given Fred a list of places to go, let him do all the delivering and in their "old" surrey. It never occurred to her. What was the gift without the giver's delivering it? She would go first to Cousin Nathalia. Already installed on Hadyn Hill, she would be in charge until the bride and groom returned — and afterward. Jed's marriage *was* a good thing, even if he hadn't wanted to acquire Cousin Nathalia for life. But, then, who had *wanted* to acquire Trina? Instantly she was contrite. Trina was so — genteel.

Absorbed in such sympathetic — if pleasant — review of recent events and their future possibilities, Miss Milly did not even hear the sound of hooves drawing nearer from the rear. And yet she was aware of a certain feminine feeling of expectancy. There came the slighter rattle and creak of a surrey exactly like the one she had only this morning had Old Fred use for hauling two tubs of trash. With the dump on

the River, it would have been more direct to go by Second Street instead of up Main past the Elliotts' as she had directed.

In the approaching duplicate surrey, Hazel had become broomstick stiff at recognition of the sparkling black jewel. She hadn't seen it before, but detailed description had come via Melissa within minutes of its presentation. She *had* witnessed the trash-hauling trip. Both had started reactions in Hazel's hair-trigger mind and spirit (a number of women later professed to "understand perfectly").

Had Hazel not recognized the new brougham, she could not have mistaken that pile of purple plumes visible through its rear window. "Faster, Pomphrey!" The words jumped out. Hazel's toque, mostly a brown pheasant, was steadied with one brown-gloved hand, brown feather boa with the other. Dust swirled up with the speeded gait. In about two more blocks the brougham would be passed, unless it turned off Main — which it might. "Faster, Pomphrey! Wake up! Pass that — *thing!* No — wait and pass it at Lee Street — "

"But, Miz Hazel, Main's all to' up at Lee, fixin' a sewah pipe — an' de dus'll git all ovah you an' all ovah Miz Milly's new — "

"Do as you're told! Slow down a little. *Now* — pass them!"

In a great cloud, mist-fine dust was flung up from the street work, billowed out chokingly. Neither lady looked in any direction but straight ahead. Fine, powdery film dulled shiny black and thick glass. Face tucked into brown boa, brown changeable silk parasol tapping the floor, Hazel took it all in. She was dusted far worse than the other to her right, but that didn't matter. Let her show off that dusty fish bowl *now!*

Then — then — as afterward reported time without number by Old Fred, each time part of a lengthening recital, "Ah, jus' couldn' believe whut come thoo dat-air speakin' tube. 'Pass them, Fred!' " It was, in the calmest of tones, as if she'd been telling him the next stop would be at Miss Carietta's. He had to believe what he heard. Nobody ever had to ask Miss Milly over.

Yellow-and-black-spiraled buggy whip flicked. The bays jumped as one astounded animal. Without effort they swept past the open surrey and unseen by anyone except Pomphrey, Old Fred made a gesture joyously negroid. Ole Pomphrey sho' looked sick!

"Pomphrey!"

"Yas'm, Miz Hazel — yes, ma'am!" He slashed red-tasseled whip from one gray back to the other. They lunged.

"Fred — I don't wish to be covered with dust again!"

"No'm, no, ma'am," and very soft, "Lawd God!"

In front of the Opera House, the Thaxton bays were ahead. Thundering between the Bank and Lipscomb's, the Elliott grays lead. In the confusion of ladies' screams and shrill little-boy squeals, both spans

plunged into The Square — neck and neck! The "common" Hazel half standing gripped one thin rod of the surrey's top, an end of streaming feather boa clamped in her teeth. Her free hand was beating Pomphrey over the head with her brown parasol as if he were the team. Around the Court House both carriages careened. Somehow they dodged four rickety hay wagons. Miss Milly never looked up. She braced her feet under the Christmas packages hopping like colored grains of popping corn. Cousin Nathalia's mauve dressing sack had come unwrapped partially, was on the floor, now on the seat, now in her lap. Other gifts leaped and fell. Notebook in one hand and speaking-tube in the other she ignored all alike. "Faster, Fred!"

Behind the Court House there was a mule auction in full cry — fuller *now*. It forced them toward the River's South Wagon Bridge. It was barely wide enough for one vehicle!

"The bridge, Fred — first!" Yellow-and-black lashed across bay hides and the brougham jumped ahead by half a length. Just in time, Pomphrey swung his grays sharply to the left, avoiding a smashup by inches. The bays swept thunderingly, triumphantly across the bridge.

Placidly Miss Milly began restoring order to her toilet. Then she began rewrapping Cousin Nathalia's sack. "Let the horses catch their breath over there by the skating-rink, Fred. Then Hadyn Hill — remember?"

"Yas'm." He turned off East Main to a halt of sweaty hides and blared, hard breathing nostrils. "We sho' beat 'em fah'n'squar, didn' we, Miz — "

"See if the harness is — all right. Wipe the dust off with the rag I gave you to keep under the seat."

"Yes'm." His was great disappointment. Mistuh Calvin, now, would'a' *wanted* to talk about hit. "Laws-ee! Look-a-yondah — 'cross de Rivuh!"

Pomphrey, tickled with his quick thinking, which was all that had saved the surrey an almost surely serious injury, had been steadying the grays by walking and talking to them. "By de skin o' mah teeth, Miz Hazel, dat's all whut saved us frum a ba-a-ad acci-*dent*. If I wasn't de bes' drivuh in dis heah town, we wouldn't be — Ow — Miz Hazel!" For (as Old Fred had just pointed out) his mistress half standing in back was again beating him over the head with the brown parasol. "Stupid black fool! Just when we had 'em where we'd've smashed every glass in the thing — !"

"But, Miz Hazel, Mister Bill'd kill me if I got you skint-up, or hurt de grays or — " He shut up, bowed his rounded shoulders to a fury of blows hardly felt, was already laughing to himself about everything but one — da no-'count Fred wuz gonner make his life a miz'ry

fer weeks tuh come! Suddenly as they had begun, harmless blows ended with the parasol's breaking into bits connected only by shreds of brown changeable silk. Hazel plumped back down. She ignored the whooping crowd and primly rearranged her feather boa. "What're you waiting for, Pomphrey? Drive on!"

"Whar — what to, Miz Hazel?"

"Forgotten again! Really, Pomphrey — you have no idea how you annoy me. Take me to — to Lipscomb's."

"Dat ain't whar you — "

"Pomphrey — Lipscomb's!"

"Yas'm." He turned the quieted grays to complete the circle around the Court House, passed through a completely disrupted mule auction and headed back up Main.

"Fred!" Miss Milly became shrill, "Stop that senseless shaking and get back on the seat. You can't get all the dust off with one small rag. I'll get you a larger one — after Christmas. Hadyn Hill!"

"Yas'm!"

They turned and drove back across the bridge. If the cheering crowd — seemingly the entire County population — had expected any acknowledgement of their presence from "the winner" they were disappointed. Through the thick of the crowd, she saw no one, not even her husband. Right then Calvin wanted to be seen less than at any time he could recall. He recognized the poke in his back.

"Feeling kind of spunky, ain't you? Needn't! *That* wasn't anything to judge by. My grays had the race won, just slowed down to prevent a smashup."

"Want to be beat *again*?" Calvin was delighted to have this aspect of the matter come up, that other — the ugly *woman*-side ignored. "Everybody knows now those spavined grays are no match for — "

"I've got a thousand dollars that don't!"

Their eyes gleamed with good-natured excitement. For all their loyalty as husbands, the citizenry was treated to its second memorable event of the day: Two of its most prominent citizens shaking hands even as they leaned against the front of a nigger fried-fish joint laughing out loud — not only Bill but a Thaxton!

Miss Milly at about the same time was forcing herself to sit in the furniture-packed, betasseled, fringed and draped Hadyn parlor. She hadn't time today to visit anywhere, but she needed Cousin Nathalia — for a moment or two. Whatever one might think of some of Cousin Nathalia's ideas, she did bring home "the unimportance of the trivial as opposed to the significant."

"How *could* I have let myself be drawn into such a — such a — "

"There's never been anything in the family of the kind before." Miss Nathalia having listened to a hasty version of the race without a

single interruption, now bent over the tea-tray clatter, bony wrists arched so as to show most clearly the superficialities of a world too often, and increasingly, one the Hill Families would never have created. "How do *you* explain it, Millicent?"

"Something took hold of me — something irresistible. I could no more have let that woman cover my beautiful present with dust and ride on — unscathed, than I could have — could have — I knew then I should have just — *not* seen it. She's been aching to get back at me, of course, ever since her — '*oyster* supper'! I just couldn't, that's all. Was it because Calvin is so proud of the bays, do you suppose?"

"I do *not*." Miss Nathalia was making no concessions. "From somewhere you got what made you do it — perhaps, from our mutual ancestor, Alpheus. I've never told anyone, but his *Grand*mother Tutulia is why I discontinued my genealogical research. I could have made up for her 'a life of good works' from whole cloth — as I happen to know Carietta did for *her* Great-great-grandmother Celamine Llewellyn Cahoon. But I preferred the method of labeling ours 'family records of Tutulia Westmoreland destroyed by fire.' It was quite true. *I* so destroyed them!"

"Cou-sin Na-tha-lia!"

"I've never regretted it an instant. If she's 'come back' in this little — lapse of yours, we are — forewarned. Mrs. Elliott knows *exactly* where *her* impulse came from. Yours — if so it was — we can begin overlooking *now* — be thankful it wasn't *worse!*"

"Worse? How *could* it have been?"

Miss Nathalia took a punctuating sip of tea. The camel-lines about wide lead-colored mouth drew down. "Easily. Your bays might have *lost*."

Excitement had failed to wear the boy out. Marshall himself had been worn out since seven. He and Moira had been awakened at five-thirty by Tam, half out his little cotton flannel gown, climbing and jabbering all over them. They had "let" themselves be pulled out of bed to open the kitchen-living-room door, locked only this one morning a year.

He had scooted past them to begin burrowing under the small, pungent, miraculous cedar. Last night it had been bare. Now it was strung with chains of popcorn, cranberries and silver foil, with a giant metal star on top and underneath — *underneath!*

"Marshall — he'll get a fever if he keeps this up — "

"How about *me?* Light the fire, Moira. It's chilly for him."

"I'd forgotten. Help him open that big box from the Thaxtons —

before he hurts himself." Marshall knelt and putting his arms around his son tried to help untie the fancy red and gold ribbons.

"Nuh-uh!"

"All right, smarty!" He kissed the swirls of reddish brown that had once been curls, and sat back to watch. The boy was going to be like him, wanting to do everything for himself. That sounded like Sironia's doting fathers he'd made so much fun of. Well, if a man wasn't justified in making a fool of himself over his only child at Christmas — Miss Milly's musical draw-toy opened, admired and left upside down, Tam had attacked another package.

"Look, Dadd-ee, look at this un." Mostly from family friends, some of his presents were from customers at Lipscomb's who would never pay their bills there. They probably assumed that by sending the owner's son a seventy-five-cent toy (also charged on their account) Marshall couldn't be uncouth enough to press for payment. He probably wouldn't.

He didn't suppose he'd ever been so happy — well, "contented" might come nearer to it — than he was now. Three hours of this and still no signs of weakening on the part of an inexhaustible little demon! Well, it didn't happen but once a year — for which, Heark, ye herald angels, *sing!*

His knees were cramping from the long sit. He had even eaten his breakfast on the floor. But now — yes, the tousled head was beginning to wobble a bit. Its owner without looking around had just let go, to plop down on fat little behind. It was certainly a simple way to sit.

"Look, Mom-muh. Mom-muh, look!"

"Yes, darling." Moira left off drying the dishes. "Pretty! Santa was fine to you — because you're so sweet!"

"Moira, if you don't stop telling him that every minute, he'll grow up believing it. Then I'll have to beat it out of him."

"Sure and a fine one it is *you* are — blaming me for spoiling the little — "

A light knock, more a rattle, had come on the front door. She flicked her hands free of dish water in the sink and dried them on her apron as she went to the door. Repeating the low tap was a black little Negro. He might be eight or twelve. His face would be that of a baby until it suddenly, years from now, changed to that of an old man. "Mis-tuh Marshall heah?"

"Yes — it's Coriander, ain't it?"

"No'm. I'se Co'ander's bruth-er, Bobo!"

"Merry Christmas, Bobo! How're all the fam'ly?"

"Jus' fine, Miz Moira. I — I got wuhd fer Mis-tuh Marshall."

"What is it?" Marshall actually creaked to his feet, knees numb, calves aching.

Huge white eyes walled up to the tree's silver star. It drove every thought from round little head until Marshall cleared his throat loudly. "A wagon's broke down, Mistuh Mar-shall, ovah by de dump grounds. She — *dey* wants you to come — quick — *dey* say."

"Marshall, who'd be calling on *you* to fix a — "

"Can't imagine. If that new driver's taken out the delivery wagon again without asking, I'm going to whale some sense — "

"Marshall, it's Christmas."

"And one *he* won't soon forget!" He was adding enough clothing to go out. In pleasant chill of yellow sun, long black coat and wide-brimmed "river gambler" hat might be too much. "Lead on, boy!"

"Don't, Dadd-ee, don't!" Imperious command, disregarded, changed to a whimper. Stocky legs trotted after him, only to have all of him yanked back inside and the door shut.

It was laughable, for all its poignancy, the pain of separation which sliced at Marshall's heart. He was nothing but an old family man. Some would say it was time he was. Whatever the trouble, he'd get back here in a hurry. This was Tam's day, and nothing else was —

"Mis-tuh Marshall!" Bobo had caught up with a panting trot. "Mis-tuh — "

"Oh, sure — Christmas Gift! Heah, you little rascal." He slid into the raised hand a quarter-dollar, was surprised to see it clink against — a whole dollar. "Where'd you get all that?"

Indecision approached consternation. Puffy lips clamped tight. In silence they crossed Aurelia Street. The little imp had probably stolen it. His mammy and daddy were good niggers. "Mis-tuh Marshall, will de debbil git me fer lyin' on Chris-muss?"

"Lying any time is bad."

"If I tells yuh de trufe — an'," the white eyes were aswim in tears now, "— an' gives her de dolluh back, will he — Lawd God!" Bobo had spun around, was scuttling away toward the River.

"Well, I'll be — !"

"T-t-t, Mister Marshall Lipscomb, not on Christmas Day!"

He recognized the intimate, persuasive contralto before he did its owner. "I beg your pardon, ma'am." Not that this woman, for all her dark — er — patrician beauty, well displayed by tightly draped, dark green riding habit, was entitled to any "ma'am" from him. But he'd give her the benefit of the doubt — when there *was* none. "If you'll excuse me, ma'am, I'll be moving on — there's a wagon broken down near here someplace — "

"*I* don't see any wagon." It was true, not only was there no wagon

in sight, but her teasing, space-toothed smile told him there hadn't been any. "You've forgotten my name!" Heavy red lips parted revealing again the upper white teeth, perfect except for that middle gap. "Men don't — usually."

"I'm sorry — I'm not good at names, but I never forget a face — certainly not one as beautiful as yours!" He lifted his hat to turn back toward home.

"That helps. It isn't — right to — be provoked with anyone *today*, is it? Would you help me mount the little mare I'm riding? She's hitched around the corner on — is it Lee Street? It so often is — in towns this size."

"We all think highly of General Lee, ma'am!"

"Heavens! You Southerners!"

"What're you, ma'am? A — "

"S-s-sh! Partly, both. My father — so I'm told, I never saw him — lived in Maryland. Sometimes he was one, sometimes the other — depending. I'm *very* much afraid, on which side was winning. Isn't that terrible?"

"Sure is."

"I was joking. I'm more 'South' than — you, for instance."

"*I* wasn't joking. And now — if you'll excuse me, I'll get your mount."

"I'll come along." She fell in step beside him, the waving tops of green plumes about even with his eyes. Her skin forced appreciation. It was white, clear and firm. She might be as much as thirty. But hers was not the thirty of most women around here. Theirs was one showing hard work, family-raising and devotion — an honorable thirty.

"You are thinking some very uncomplimentary things about me. The pity of it is that they're all true." The high-nosed Marie Antoinette face looked up from under green plumes, not coyly, nor coquettishly, and certainly not honestly, but brazenly — alluringly. "And the worst of it is there's no excuse for *me*. I was not an overworked, mistreated child. I was not maidenly innocent until taken advantage of by a man — like you. I had a good home — and at one time a good enough husband. I wanted more. As I said, there's no excuse for me — really!"

"Well, no one can say you're not — truthful."

"Oh, but they can!" She laughed what at the time was undoubtedly the most physically exciting laugh Marshall had ever heard. "You look about twenty when — flustered. Should become so more often. But I haven't told you why I sent for you, have I?"

"No-o. Something about — Syringa, isn't it?"

"No. *That* gentleman — I use the word loosely — is a dead-to-the-world casualty of last evening with me — '*Young* Tom,' indeed! It

was quite in the Christmas spirit. You—" she tapped his chest with russet leather riding crop, "—should have been there. You and this Mister Elliott. *Young* Tom won't let him come near me."

"You've met Bill? I don't remember hearing him mention your—"

"Have *you* mentioned my name—to him?" The laugh again, almost masculine in its friendliness, but damnably feminine, too. "By the way, the name is Garrick, Patsy Garrick. You knew all along, of course?"

"Are you trying to make me act like a—a—"

"Like a fool? Certainly—why should *you* be different?" She looked up Second Street and down, then turned completely around. "You have *now* seen both profiles, and front and rear views. Are you sorry there is no—wagon?"

"Don't think I'll answer that."

"You learn quickly. He," she shrugged a shoulder up at Syringa, "—never will! That is why I have lasted longer up there than—others. I keep him puzzled and feeling ridiculous, still hoping someday to get the upper hand. Then he'll throw me out. He's been wrong—before. Do you know he actually thought that after Jed Hadyn had prepared the way with the Lanes' amateur—"

"Please!"

"Squeamish or—Christmas? Well, anyhow, *she* wouldn't even listen to him. She'll go far, that girl! And when *I* heard, I too made it a memorable occasion. I don't think my position there will be challenged again soon."

"Then—why?"

"Why? *You*. I *never* know when I'm well off. It will prove far too many people liars if I don't come to a bad end. There have even been the hints he might marry *me*—uggh!" She gave an excellent demonstration of physical repugnance. "Having achieved complete success, I then began—casting around. Would it amuse you to know that in the running for a time was Thaxton's imbecile heir?"

"No!"

"Oh, I forgot about—never mind what! Well, he wasn't for long. Next was the father. A few minutes alone with him in his office at the Bank were enough to show that while I could probably do it, it would take more time than I am willing to—"

"You actually—approached Calvin."

"He's a man, isn't he?" The full lips twisted out the words. "But not my type. I sent the next possibility word Young Tom was considering building an addition to Syringa. He drove up to Syringa with a buggyful of children—niggers—mostly! That was one thing I'd never have expected. It gave me a chance to compare him with the next—possibility. *You*—won! Now—*you* talk!"

"I am flattered."

"Needn't be!" Her lips were smiling, thin now and moist, but her dark eyes were — what *were* those eyes doing? Caressing him — undressing him — or cutting him to bloody ribbons? "Bill Elliott and Calvin Thaxton are both too much the — plunger for Patsy. In ten years time, you'll have *ten* times what they have — unless by that time *I* have it."

"Any other reasons?"

"Yes — one more, but I'll hold that back if I may — or if I may *not*."

"Sounds — " His own laughter easy, soft — intimate. This, like so many other beginnings of his, was happening in spite of him. " — like a threat."

"That's — " while she slid the loop end of riding crop softly all the way down the middle line of his body, " — what it is."

"Lady, when Young Tom told me about you, I thought he was lying — "

"I doubt it. On my mother's side, I come *from* the oldest and finest of South Carolina, suh! It is entirely right, the old belief, that nobody can sink lower than a well-born woman who loses her pride — " She ground the heel of her riding boot slowly, deeply into loose clay, " — for example, me!" Without warning, she struck a stinging blow across his calves, enjoyed his wince of pain. "Pay attention when I'm talking! Incidentally — when am I apt to see you — in New Orleans?"

"Mister Bly might have something to say about — "

"Knows better! Besides, I've in mind a new *belle amie* for him, one who will meet his — rather specialized tastes — on a share-and-share-alike basis with me."

"Aren't you being a little *too* frank?"

"I can *afford* to be."

"And what does that mean?"

"You'll find out." She laughed girlishly, did it well.

"Suppose — I say there is no chance of my being in New Orleans any time soon — *unless* you tell me what it is that makes you so sure I won't — betray your confidence?"

She shrugged and pointed to the chestnut mare's reins tied to a low evergreen. He loosed them, and held his hands cupped on bent knee. She put tiny spurred boot in them and with a slight lift from him seemed to slide along his body and into the sidesaddle. She took the reins, and leaned forward to tuck a folded sheet of paper highly scented with orrisroot inside his shirt. "Addresses so-o often help in locating — friends, don't you agree?"

"You didn't," it had started within him all over, the old one-way ring-around, "answer my question."

Red mouth widened into the most natural, most mischievous of

young smiles. Spurs jabbed deeply. The abused mare jumped away.

He stood watching the dust swirl up, could not have seen her look back and wave had she done so. Throbbing insistence inside him spread. It became one with the uncertainty, the fear of the known, its torment, too. Another minute and he might have carried her off into the underbrush there. She knew it, too. Cruel, evil, completely without conscience, she wouldn't be out of his mind until she was in his arms. Just look at him! Forty years old and tingling as he had the first time he'd ever stood beside a naked woman, trousers sliding down his thighs, calves, ankles—

CHAPTER 10

THE LOUD KNOCKING on the front door continued. Calvin, although he had just been awakened, was as annoyed as he ever let anyone other than Milly make him. Old Fred probably wasn't even in his little room off the kitchen. He'd let the door go unanswered. No. As usual, he'd have to go, himself — and quickly, if Milly was not to be disturbed. If that happened, she never would get back to sleep, would require sympathy, look put-upon — but brave. Calvin would answer a thousand midnight knocks before he'd go through all that.

He got himself quickly into navy bathrobe and leather slippers. Flat soles slapping, he was half down the stair curve by match-light. "What is it, Cal-vin? What in the *world* — at this time of night? What time *is* — "

"Some mistake probably. Go back to sleep, my dear."

"You're trying to keep something from me!"

"I don't know yet whether I am or not." He was almost downstairs, called back up, "You know how loss of sleep upsets you and — "

"Stop exaggerating! If something terrible has happened, and it must have, I'll have to know it. You know how excited *you* get—"

He mumbled something she ceased talking to catch, but all she heard was "What is it?" as he opened the wide front door.

"A telly-gram fer yuh, Mistuh Calvin, suh." It was Catullus, the Negro clean-up boy at the depot. "Hit come 'bout uh hour ago, but Mistuh Alf he say he couldn' leave de dee-po ter bring hit an' he say hit tuk uh hour ter wake me. Dat ain't so, Mistuh Calvin. Mistuh Alf were so excited he fergot whar at I was sleepin'. I changed las' week from—"

"Give me the message, Catullus. Consarn that match—gone out just when I—Forgot my glasses, too, damn it!"

"Hit say uh oil gusher done bin found somewhar—I fergits—an' you an' Mistuh Bill Ell-yut bettuh sen' mo' money. I disremembuhs whut fer. 'Hit's from somebody named Jal-lux."

"Thank you, Catullus!" He could make out enough to tell the boy was right. "Find one of the Freds out back. Tell him to hitch Shiloh to my buggy. Then wait *here!* I'll drop you at the depot soon's I see Mr. Elliott. Wait!" He shut the door and ran, slippers flopping crazily, upstairs. Again in his room, he read the telegram word for word. There was no time to lose. He and Bill had to do one of two things: Let their investments stand, or follow Jalloux's tip so as not to miss the chance of a lifetime—really plunge.

"What *is* it, Calvin?"

"The Beaumont field has come in—the biggest in years! I'm afraid, Milly, we're going to be very rich—"

"I just knew it!" She was at their door in her gown without a negligée! "I said to myself it could only be about the oil well. I might as well get dressed—won't sleep another wink—"

"There's *no* chance for more news tonight. You *know* how loss of sleep affects—"

"Don't say that *again*, Calvin Thaxton. I can do without sleep as well, or better, than anyone else in this family. If you could see how ridiculous you look with your hair all—where're you going?"

"To tell Bill. He's as much in it as I am." She snatched up the telegram from a table and was reading the message in night operator Alf Teebo's business-college script—with flourishes.

"Oh! You aren't going to put *more* into the thing! *Don't do it,* Calvin!"

"You never want me to invest in anything but Sironia real estate—"

"I know I objected to your going into this, but you've got enough in it—"

"All right, Milly, I'm not going to take any chances—unless it's a sure thing." The last few words had been added so softly she couldn't

possibly have understood. As on previous occasions, they served to ease his conscience. He had never lied to Milly, wasn't now. But he couldn't afford to get her wrought up when she didn't know the very first thing about business — the kind that was always advising.

She stood looking out the window at the top of the moonlit summer-house while he finished dressing, repeating her instructions on what he was *not* to do. "Don't you worry, dear. Before long, you'll be wearing so many diamonds that Carietta Storrow won't sleep nights."

"I don't care about diamonds. I do care — and very much — about *gambling*. That's what this is, Calvin Thaxton, just plain out-and-out gambling. Before you leave this house, you've got to promise me you won't put another cent in this thing without talking it over with somebody who *knows*, somebody who lives in Beaumont, and not *then*, unless — " She was almost screaming down the stair well as the old Slaves' Door shut behind him. If it hadn't been for the gambling streak which cropped out in the Thaxtons every generation or so, she wouldn't have taken such a stand. When it did, there was no stopping it. It had never shown in Calvin — not "seriously" — but as Cousin Nathalia had told her, that didn't mean it never would. Cousin Nathalia had her genealogical tables — much farther back on one branch than "Destroyed by fire" — to prove it.

Calvin jumped in the buggy, Catullus after him. High-headed Shiloh, wide awake, seemed to flow down the back drive with the fast rattle of gravel and the rush of fine, cold air — wonderful, invigorating air that even smelled like oil — and money!

"Guess y'all's goner be mo' richer'n' evuh?"

"Stea-a-ady, now!" Shiloh had become suddenly skittish at swaying Main Street tree shadows. "Maybe, so, Catullus, but we've never been what anybody outside of Sironia would call 'rich' — "

"My pappy done said yistiddy he don' see how you kin have much lef', wid all dem wuthless niggers you keeps up. He say dey lives off y'all jus' cause dey had a gran'pappy whut wuz a Thaxton nigger."

"Some of 'em ain't worth killing, Catullus. But it isn't *all* their fault — "

"Hmmph!" Catullus' honest disgust was strong from his record of having held down a steady job at the depot for going on a year now. "*Hit'll* sho' be nice fer Mistuh Lance — won't it?"

"Yes — yes, it will." He'd always wanted to fix things so Lance wouldn't have any money worries. With the cotton market always acting up or the River flooding or a drought threatening, with Milly's lavish hospitality, he'd never been able to put aside nearly enough.

"Whut's de mattuh, Mistuh Calvin?" Deep, genuine was the concern in soft Negro voice. "Isn't you feelin' real good or — "

"No, Catullus, no!" He must make that plain or it would be all over town he was expecting to die any minute. "Feel fine!"

"Dat's *good!* I wouldn' want nothin' ter happen ter *you,* Mistuh Calvin — nor Miz Milly nor Mistuh Lance, neithuh. She don't take no foolishment off'n nobody, but she got a heart big as — as Thaxton Hill — an' Mistuh Lance — you don' know how nice he is to ever'body *all* de time. Sometimes hit seems he's mo' like — " He stopped, didn't go on.

"What, Catullus?"

"I jus' say he's sho' ni-ice to us niggers — *sho'* is."

No need to follow up. Probably hadn't been anything, anyhow.

They swung left so sharply that both right wheels cleared, and came to sudden halt under the "Hotel's" gray and white porte-cochère. Let's see: *their* room was over there.

"Where does Pomphrey sleep, Catullus?"

"Him and Maydelle's got *nice* rumes, up ovah de stable."

"Maydelle's his oldest girl — the one you been going with?"

"Yessuh. If you wants Pomphrey, he's home."

"How *you* know?"

"Now, Massa Calvin!" His grin was the spuriously innocent one of the Lotharian successful, the world over. He broke into a shambling, soundless run toward the rear. Two were coming back toward Calvin only seconds later.

"I've got to see Mister Bill, Pomphrey — on business. Can you get him down here without waking Miss Hazel?"

"I doubts hit!" He remembered his manners as he became more awake. "Won' you have a seat on de front po'ch? Onless you'd ruther come inside. Hit's gittin' some colder."

"The porch'll do fine. Better drive down to the street, Catullus — Shiloh might disturb Miss Hazel. Wait there." He walked around the huge frame home to wide front steps and up on the small front porch — small, that is, compared with Reardon ideas.

The front hall's calla lilies were lighted almost instantly. "Come in, Calvin. What is it?" Bill had opened the door, only trousers and overcoat showing. "Somebody sick?"

"No — this!" He handed the wire to him under the hall chandelier. "The oil wells have come in — gushers!"

"Do*ggone!* Wait'll I go tell Hazel — "

"And be quick, about it!" From the top of the stair, Hazel was calling. "Hello, Calvin. Sit down — anywhere!"

Bill ran up to hand her the wire, then ran back down to usher Calvin into the library, turned a sudden, rich yellow by electricity. "Seems we gotter make up our minds quick. I've already put in every cent I got — in ready cash."

"Same here — also, some that wasn't."

"But with Jalloux right there on the ground — !"

"Milly says for me not to put another cent in!"

"Dead right, too. How'd be the best way to raise — more — if we *were* thinking about — "

"Mortgage everything we've got — out of town so's to cause less talk. Here it'd get back to Milly in no time."

"Hmm! Mind if I ask Hazel — something?" Already on the way, he was back downstairs in a few minutes. "She says if I miss this chance, she'll never speak to me again. She's a natural born gambler. She says *verify* what Jalloux says and if he's right, go whole hog!"

"Absolutely! And if we do?"

"We'll ride to glory — *or* the poorhouse!"

Calvin's collar had become tight as it always did on the verge of a big deal. "Oughtn't we give our over-cautious friend another chance to come in on this?"

"Sure. Who're you going to wire to verify — ?"

"I know two bankers in Beaumont. I'll wire both. I can drop you by Marshall's while I get the wires off."

Calvin gave Shiloh his head down Main in the cold stillness. Catullus had to hang on back with both arms. Cloud-dimmed moonlight shattered in uncountable shimmering ripples on powerful bay muscles bulging and sinking only to bulge again. "Bet I know what you're thinking, Bill."

"Bet you do, too. Crow while you *can,* boy. The time's coming you're going to be shown your bays are just a couple of livery-stable nags."

"Nags! They can lick any windbroken old grays in the County — any time — any distance — any driver!"

"Any *money?*"

"Any money!" They cut left on two wheels at Aurelia, the Lipscombs' corner. "I'll be ready whenever you say. You can pay off later!"

"*Me* pay off — huh! I'm calling you before you find any more excuses. How 'bout the race track?" As Calvin nodded, he added, "And — what will Miss Milly have to say about that?"

"I was just wondering. She's going on a little trip as soon as Jed and Trina get back and have been entertained into a coma. And what will Hazel have to say?"

"She'll be all for it — unless the grays lose again, in which case I'll leave town before she finds out. That, however, *won't* be necessary!"

"Hah!" Calvin made a great show of the extraordinary strength required to bring Shiloh to a stop in front of the Lipscomb cottage. "Make it short, Bill. I'll be back."

In less than thirty minutes he was. Marshall and Bill came out together. "Calvin, 'our cautious friend' is right. He's getting too old to take a chance."

"Go on, you two. Josh me all you want to. Everything the Lipscombs ever got came from hard work—which some don't understand."

"We're being insulted, Calvin!"

"Think so? Never mind, our *prudent* friend may feel differently when the answers to my wires come rolling in."

"No, I won't. You two think you are letting me in on a good thing—and, it's damn fine of you. It's embarrassing, after you take the trouble to come by this time of—"

"Forget it! I understand, even if this muttonchopped orang-outang with me doesn't. Get in, Bill!"

They waved Marshall a high sign as they drove off. "It *would* be—kind of funny, Bill, if we did guess wrong on this, wouldn't it?"

"I'd die laughing. But Jalloux knows what he's doing. It'll be a shame to take the money! And if we should lose? We're both healthy enough and ornery enough to get back on our feet in a few years—"

"The way you talk makes me wish we *would* lose—almost."

It was a week since the bride and groom had returned. For Jed all the factors of life here had already fallen into established custom. He didn't doubt the marriage was the one best thing for both of them. Hadn't he settled down seriously to looking after the farm? Wasn't he coming straight home most nights and staying there regardless of all the places he'd rather be? And hadn't he given up more than he wanted to remember to make Nelia a real home on Hadyn Hill?

Those same, mostly reassuring, questions were again asking themselves as he sat with his pipe in the carved walnut chair his father had composed those last sonnets in. Soon he'd be in the right mood to go on upstairs with an enthusiasm for things conjugal sufficient to carry full conviction. Trina was nobody's fool.

He rarely thought now of the parts played in his marriage by Cousin Carietta and the unspeakable Nettie. Another Hadyn had done his duty.

Trina seemed happy enough. Other than himself, who had occasion for regret? And, everything considered, did *he?*

True, there were a few minor annoyances. If Trina were only less intelligent, didn't show so plainly she'd never forget *why* he'd married her. Why couldn't she lie to herself as all happy people had to? Or else quit loving him so—so selflessly? He wished she were not a person it went against the grain to hurt. It was the least part of honor that he do a damn good job as the eager bridegroom.

No one could say marriage had trapped him, for this had been his

wish if not his wanting. Nelia would someday realize all he had given up for the family's sake, for *hers* most of all. She was his responsibility. He would have talks with her at intervals, leave no doubt as to what was expected of her.

There must be no more "romantic" regrets. The way to handle such facts was to face them — down. Never — as their father had done — try to "escape" them.

He still loved Laurine, probably always would. He could see now it was probably true that "a man can love a memory far longer than he can a woman." But Cousin Carietta, whom he had hated for this, had been right.

Could he say even now which feeling was strongest: crushing *finality* that he had lost Laurine; *certainty* that he had conducted himself in the true Hill Family tradition; or *relief* at the end to torment? Even now doubts came, vanished, came again. They left moments of humiliated desperation, of physical longing for Laurine. He could see her when he was alone, when the whiskey that jumping nerves demanded quickened some perceptions, dulled others. The more he drank, the nearer Laurine came. *In dreams* she was again all, entirely his. Trina had said he was "so sweet" at times in the middle of the night when she'd thought he was asleep.

He did not drink on "The Hill," only during the nights — growing more frequent — when he stayed out at Hadyn Farm "so as to get the hands to work early." After Trina had gone up for the night, he would wait as long as he could, then make himself follow. Trina carried being a lady too far — into bed. It was almost time now to go up — not quite. In just a few minutes he would.

Would he ever know what had become of Laurine? The salesman she'd gone off with had answered Marshall Lipscomb's letter of inquiry. He had lost track of her in New Orleans, seen her once afterward with "a Frenchified old fellow who looked like he was made of money." As a sort of postscript, there had been, "I don't think you need worry, Mister Lipscomb. *That* girl'll get along all right." Was that true or had he just been excusing himself? (The answer to that was to be ten years in coming.)

A clock struck — somewhere upstairs. Stolidly Jed tapped out his pipe, slipped it into a lower coat pocket. Heavy-footed and slowly, he walked up the stairway, the bridegroom to the bridal bed that from his plodding might have been solitary confinement.

Janke's Feed Store was located at the southeast corner of The Square. Above it were the editorial offices, the advertising department, the typesetting and printing and the paper storage of *The Sironia*

Sentinel. A tall, loose-hinged man in baggy salt-and-pepper gray was sauntering petulantly up and down this former "loft." Unconsciously but expertly, he avoided desks, hand presses, type racks and spittoons. This was Caleb Hone, Editor, Advertising Manager, and Feature Writer, but *not* owner. Long, straight strands of white hair strayed farther from the pink skull and exasperated fingers ran through them as he expressed himself concerning the news he was *not* allowed to print. His voice was nasal, one usually identified with New England. Caleb had come from Pennsylvania.

Not even listening to the lengthy jeremiad about the restrictions on a small-town newspaper, Abe Janke, a pimply fifteen, sullenly went about oiling a hand press. While nothing was in writing, it was understood that whenever Caleb needed help it would be drawn from the seemingly inexhaustible pool of his landlord's sons. Last month it had been Gus Janke. By summer it would probably be still another. It didn't matter: all of them were "dolts." To the Jankes, one and all, Caleb was a dam-yankee, which disposed once and for all time of any views he might or might not put into twangy, high-pitched objection.

"So, my young philosopher," he addressed Abe, who didn't look up, "we have another flood coming apace down the River. Some Weather Bureau has warned it may be the worst in ten years. But — does *The Sironia Sentinel* dare print that?" (He was exaggerating, and Abe knew it.) "No, it might interfere with the January Sheet and Towel Sale at Lipscomb's. Might alter the social schedule of Archduchess Carietta in the series of parties she has decreed in honor of that stalk-of-celery she made Jed Hadyn marry." Caleb was now circling the office, that part cut off from the rest by a two-foot green rail. Normally pale face was splotched with a little purple and a lot of red. He was getting himself in the mood for an editorial (he knew, in advance) he'd never publish. "Abe, don't ever permit yourself to become an editor in a hide-bound, tradition-ridden jumping-off Whiff of the Past!"

Scrawny little Abe paused just long enough in his oiling to raise heavy lids in a pecan-like profile. There was no comprehension there.

"No, Abe, granting an editor the discernment of Disraeli, the wit of Pope, the dramatic sweep of Bret Harte, and scholarship of Daniel Webster, every time he gets a chance to use *any* of them he is — 'waited upon.' Sometimes it's only one or two, sometimes a whole delegation, and sometimes — God forbid! — Mrs. Storrow. You saw me look from my window in a so-called free country and see with my own eyes Sironia's personal interest story of the year! You saw me at fever heat dash off a veritable masterpiece of restraint that would have had Reardon County rolling in its favorite hog-wallows in paroxysms of hilarity. When — *who* breezes in? All in light yellow and a straw hat atrail with wisteria? Not ten minutes before we go to

press?" His voice became more soft, as sweet as he could make it. " 'Now, Mister Hone, you just know you can't print any such thing as that. Why, Cousin Milly stands for all that's best and finest. Suppose her bays did get out of control of that worthless Fred — why, a runaway is a serious thing, Mister Hone!' And you saw, Abe, how polite I was and yet how firm. The freedom of the press was at stake. You heard her same as tell me that if I printed anything — anything at all about the Great Carriage Race, practically every subscription and, what really meant something, all advertising would be canceled. And she *wasn't* bluffing! But you heard me, the lone representative of that greatest of our freedoms, that freedom than which there — er — *for* which there is no sacrifice too great, you heard me, saw me rise, in my righteous — er — choler — and tell her, right to her royal wisterianess, 'Why, Mrs. Storrow,' I expressed the courage of my convictions, 'I wouldn't think of printing anything which would displease the people who have made Sironia what it is. I do thank you, ma'am, from the bottom of my heart for correcting my mistaken impression that it was a vulgar — race!' Abe, you saw me grab my stomach as if it were my heart in a deferential bow, heard her 'Why, I do declare, Mister Hone, if you aren't— getting to be one of us — and the *sweetest* man.' Yes, my boy, you can tell your grandchildren — and it's my guess you'll have a great many — that you can remember when editors *fought* for the right. God*damn!*" Prepared to resume, he saw the stairway door open. Catullus was part way in the door, excitement in eyes and all other visible portions.

"Hit's on de way, Mistuh Hone, see?" Catullus extended the wire report from upriver Wingtown's paper which exchanged services with the *Sentinel.*

"Thank you, Catullus. Don't go yet. I think I must send a message. Let me see — " He was bristling with professional activity. The news was undoubtedly spreading already, but his afternoon edition — let's see, three hours away — could carry it. Plenty of time. It took about twenty-four hours for a rise to get here from Wingtown. First, he'd see Mayor Rogan. Then he'd send word to Mrs. Storrow asking her to take charge as usual of the Women's Division. Then — No, he'd be damned if he would!!

He scrawled and scratched for three yellow sheets full, folded them to fit in the first envelope to hand, a used one. He scratched out his own name and that of the sender, and handed it to Catullus. "Take that to — the Mayor — in the City Hall — understand?"

"Mistuh Oscuh?"

"Yes — Mister Oscar! Vamoose!" He pounded his desk loudly. It seemed literally to bounce the young Negro out and down the stairs.

Caleb took up the pencil he had just broken. He had acted on

impulse. It was not too late to change. He could still devote the whole front page to one story with banner-type headline:

SIRONIA THREATENED BY GREATEST FLOOD
IN HISTORY

and let the ads and household recipes take care of the other three pages. But, no, it had been too long since the *Sentinel* had started — or finished — anything for public weal. There was no journalistic competition, but an editor had his pride. Yes, it was about time the *Sentinel* came out for something. In support of the flood? Well, no. But — the *Sentinel* could be first this year to advocate flood-damage-prevention and flood relief. And its editor might settle something *else* too. It was his genius, long stifled, in resurrection: that's what it was — if he acted quickly.

This flood was going to be the *Sentinel*'s. "Abe, I'll be out a little while. If anyone comes in to suppress something, cut it out and run another installment of Miss Nathalia Storrow's 'Growing Up with Sironia.'" The last one alleging that that 'Pyramus' ape had shown 'indications of great promise as poet before his untimely death' was the high point in family whitewash so far. But it sold fifty extra copies — for family mailing — and Miss Nathalia always paid cash. "Not a word, Abe, to anyone about the flood. The *Sentinel* must hit the streets with the impact of a — senile squash. You are thoroughly conversant with the situation, I'm sure!" Abe hadn't even looked up.

Caleb encased the dingy salt-and-pepper suit in dingy tweed overcoat and added a frowsy, grayish-black fedora hat which, Jed claimed, always appeared to have just had kittens.

He unhitched his sorrel mare, Cassandra (own sister to Old Blue) and fold-top buggy. Their use consisted almost entirely of changes in hitching by Abe Janke from the east side of the street in the mornings to the west side in the afternoons. In cold weather, vice versa. One of Abe's few secrets was he had never liked Cassandra any better than he did his employer. As old as Miss Nathalia, for a mare, Cassandra had encountered much the same sort of frustration. But no one could ever say that Miss Nathalia amused herself by taking surly nips at the seats of trousers passing by. Why she didn't nip at Caleb's, Cassandra never revealed. Jed Hadyn was heard to expound the theory that even Cassandra drew the line somewhere, which did not improve his standing with the local press.

"Giddap, Cassy!" Caleb had seated himself in the buggy he had traded from Marshall for a life subscription. "No, not via the Square this time." Whether he spoke to her or just thought it, he could not have said. "No time to hear of the latest farm rumor of a hen mothering three orphaned baby elephants. Nor shall we go via Fourth, for

thereon resides our joint Xantippe, who misseth nothing of the passing show. It is out of the way, but Fifth it must be—"

Nanette Lane stood in her yard watching the street. This was the middle of so-called winter, and there was never anything in her yard, anyway, but the dusty evergreens good old Stacey had planted. Maybe, she was "mean-minded" but, maybe, it wasn't all her fault. If anybody had ever asked Caleb, he'd've told them to be sure first that there was no *excuse* for Nanette Lane's meanness. Just one look at Stacey ought to answer that. Being short-changed between the sheets soured a woman's milk without her even suspecting it. Someday he'd like to give over a whole edition to what really went on inside some of the prize exhibits in this town. All in all, he could say without chance of contradiction that he was the only one who felt sorry for the Nanette Lane "exhibit." Nothing he could do about it, though. Fifteen (maybe only ten) years ago, perhaps—but not now.

Hosannah in the highest—there came "The Show Case." Flashing and gleaming it drew nearer behind those dancing bays. No need to look inside: "The Show Case" never left Thaxton Hill without her. She might stop jabbing those interminable notes a while, if she knew what he was on his way to do. *Why* was he? Old Miss Nathalia in her interminable "Growing Up with Sironia" series was always harping on that about "seldom if ever do we know *why* we do things."

Cassandra hitched to one of Sironia's many four-foot iron jockeys with hand outstretched, Caleb undid her checkrein. She'd probably be nibbling what there was of the Elliott grass between curb and walk when he returned. But she wouldn't like it if he left her head reined back. "Be a good girl!" Cassandra made no reply.

Such nap as was left on the feline fedora he smoothed with his elbow, and advanced—a man with a mission—on the gray and white gingerbread and gables. At his ring, there was the usual scuffling of feet where Negro servants are employed in a swarm and have to disappear before the door is opened by the one so appointed.

"Good af'noon, Mistuh Hone."

"Hello, Pomphrey. Ask Mrs. Elliott if she can see me—just a few minutes."

"Yes, suh—yes, *suh*." His face, black and blank, plainly didn't know whether "de newspaper-man" was "parluh comp'ny" or "po'ch comp'ny." "Ye-es, suh. You wants to—come in?"

"No, thanks. Too fine a day to be inside."

"Hit sho' is!"

Black relief had been tremendous. Caleb kept his long, sallow face with its teapot-spout of a nose void of amusement as he shifted about on the gray porch spattered over with white and black flecks. Bill Elliott had sure shot up in the world. If *he'd* married Nanette Lane

she might not have been mean-minded at all. There ought to be a lot more in this "Family"-ridden town that were common like Bill Elliott, not common like Oscar Rogan. Caleb had as little use for Oscar as — well, as Miss Carietta had — couldn't put it stronger than —

"Miz Hazel, she say will yuh step intuh de li-berry."

Caleb took one of the overlarge Spanish leather chairs. Enormous brown-brick mantel dwarfed the rather small room of brown "leather wallpaper" and very red mahogany, dark red velvets and wall-to-wall carpet of dull brown complications. Pomphrey's attempt at a quick-laid fire would probably begin to throw out a little heat after Caleb was a half-hour gone.

At the swish of skirts down the stair, Caleb stood. She came swiftly in with choppy, birdlike little steps. She was all in brown merino except for the white edging on a cruelly high brown net collar and a gold neck chain with a gold lorgnette — like Mrs. Thaxton's. Every step sent it swinging far out in front. "And how *are* you, Mister Hone?"

"Fair, ma'am, fair." To a man he would have said that if he felt any better he'd have to be tied. "And —? But one doesn't have to ask. May I say you are looking splendidly?"

"You *certainly* may! And now that you have me in a most receptive mood — ?" She stood to one side and motioned him toward Spanish leather heavy-studded with brass nail heads. "These no-'count niggers! Just a minute. Sit!" She waved aside all assistance. "It seems I'm the only one in *this* house who knows the first thing about a quick fire." She was busily proving it, lorgnette tucked in brown belt. "You'd think Bill Elliott — after hoboing for — I'll probably never learn exactly how many years — would know how to handle a little kindling. You should see him try! *And* hear him! There, that's something like it!" It was.

"Every time I see you, Mrs. Elliott, you amaze me all over again."

"Hope I can keep it up!"

"Another bad flood's on its way down the River. Should hit here late tomorrow afternoon. Mayor Rogan's already got the Negroes moving out along the slew and the low ground east of the River — "

"Oh, dear! Just as things get straightened out from the one last September. Selma Rogan'll be sending me word any minute now to be on her committee for that abominable Skating-Rink Ward. She's always given the *worst* ward and invariably reserves its worst *part* for me."

"Mrs. Rogan hasn't yet been assigned any ward. Nobody has. This time I didn't go direct to Mrs. Storrow. I have come first to — you. Mrs. Elliott, will you take charge of the Ladies' Division for Flood-Relief?"

"Wha-at — ?"

The woman was genuinely "struck dumb." So much the better! He'd make the most of it. She must, he went on, know that these floods had always happened, always would until that hairpin twist in the River out near Reardon's Pasture was somehow straightened. Until then, the high water would continue to overflow into "the slew," the old river bed (except at flood times, a weed-grown ravine) around town. Once it got into the slew, there was no way to keep it from circling around past Reardon's Pasture to flood the acreage near the depot and south of Hadyn Hill. There was some flooding of East Sironia from the new river bed, but the greatest damage and greatest risk of an epidemic came from that old headline stand-by "The Slew Situation" on this side. What this situation called for was not only a woman who could direct things and get work out of people without paying them, but who could build a fire under City Administration after City Administration until preventive construction was begun, "— a sort of — lady gadfly all the aldermen will run from when they see her coming! In a word — *you!*" He did not pause. "And, furthermore, I want to get it all in the paper this afternoon — with — your helpers, their names, assignments, announcement of meeting for preliminary instructions and — you know — all the rest."

"There isn't time to write a *tenth* of the women — "

"This time we'll have to dispense with 'inviting.' We'll *tell* them."

"I know everybody'll pitch in to help during a flood, but it's — it's a big job, Mister Hone, even with notice — "

"I know it is. What I propose is to make the organization *permanent* — not have to be organized all over again every time one of these things comes along — with you in charge. You'll want to ask Mister Elliott — "

"No. He wouldn't let me. He'd insist I help Selma Rogan as usual. I'm tired of helping Selma Rogan — I'm tired and a lot of other things, Mister Hone."

"I understand — perfectly. May I — send Abe Janke and Cassandra up in about an hour for your list?"

"No-o. It is very strange, but last fall I made up just such a list for a permanent welfare — "

"So I'd heard! That's one reason I came to you."

The little beak nose and frizzy red hair seemed to jerk from her body. "But I told nobody, not even — "

"Does anybody with so many servants have to?"

"Oh, well." Again their eyes had met, and they were laughing, not as the Hill Families would, but with tickled little snorts. Suddenly she halted, all seriousness. "If I do say so as shouldn't, Mister Hone, you're going to see a flood handled like a flood should be."

"I'm sure of that. Mayor Rogan will be so beside himself with other details he'll be glad to deputize me to — deputize you —" Not a word was included about his note to the Mayor telling him he'd already signed Hazel up, nor why his mouth seemed about to smile.

"All right!" She had found the sheets of paper she was looking for under a stack in a lower desk drawer. "Here's the list. I'd like it back. I'll have Bill clear out all the lumber sheds he can spare to sleep the healthy ones, and start Jewel Kerens phoning the parents of her pupils, lining up rooms in the homes for the sick. There's a vacant warehouse I want — but I'll attend to that. Can you read my writing? In this town, a misspelled name can cause almost as much anguish as a flood."

"As well I know! Your list is perfectly clear, will go in this afternoon's edition exactly as you have it — with an explanation for the lack of notice and a rousing — er — exhortation for the support of all. May I say I think you have shown — a rare grasp of the — situation in naming as chairman for the very important work in the Skating-Rink Ward — Mrs. Calvin Thaxton?"

The River changed swiftly. Slow, brownish green with occasional clear deeps gave way to swift, ugly clay-red, thick-clotted with foamy drift at its outer edges. All night two volunteer sandbag crews had worked. The one in the V-shaped wedge near the tracks was directed by Marshall; that at the head of "The Slew" by Jed Hadyn. Except as it contributed to flood work, business all over Sironia was practically suspended. Even in the "safe" part of town the stores were closed most of the day. Nearly every "able-bodied citizen," as the *Sentinel* put it, had a full-time flood-time job. (The few who didn't made out they did.)

Already the same annually exciting stories were on the move: One of the best families (never identified) had "lost everything"; somebody had roped a pig being swept under the railroad bridge; somebody else with no business *near* the River had fallen in, been fished out. Also as usual, Oscar Rogan remembered when the high-water mark in the Freight Depot had been higher. Right on time, the customary naked woman was reported (by whom was never known) being swept downstream on a log. Judging by the detailed description of her loveliness, she must have been erect and spinning it like a lumberjack as she went by. It was a time of confusion, physical effort and weariness; of good fellowship and sincerity, of destitution and kindliness.

The *Sentinel*'s announcement about Mrs. William Fitzmaurice Elliott's civic spirit was — to a few — more sensational news than the

River's. She was to be known as "Lady Chairman of Permanent Flood Relief." The names of her committees followed. No one was omitted who had ever done or might be induced to do anything of the kind. The assignment of Mrs. Millicent Thaxton Thaxton to the Skating-Rink Ward was probably the most discussed. Mrs. Storrow, hitherto in complete charge of everything, was made responsible for the comparatively small, very smelly soup kitchen on Auction Street (in the old frame wreck where Luella's poor semblance of a love story was one day to play itself out). "While there has not been time," the account in the *Sentinel* ran, "to consult all those listed and gain their consent, it is believed that every true Sironian will be more than glad to serve in the capacity stated for the common weal of our beloved city. However, should any of those designated be unable or even unwilling to serve, they are requested to notify Mrs. Elliott's secretary-pro-tem, Mrs. Moira Lipscomb, at Flood Relief Headquarters in the River Warehouse immediately."

Whether that "every true Sironian" or, what was more likely, the genuine anxiety to serve deserved the credit, there were no refusals. Caleb was astounded: No one knew better what he termed "the strange alchemy of benevolence." Those who serve in such causes often have stronger feelings about their personal rights than they do in their own private and business lives. They get madder over "little things" than they do in work paid for. Too, those being helped "free, gratis and for nothing" pass rapidly from benumbed gratitude to suspicion, then conviction that what has been done for them is certainly *no more* than it should have been. "Nothing" (Caleb once wrote just before tossing it in his wastebasket) "bears a brighter face of gratitude and appreciation on its surface, nor darker substrata of pettiness and suspicion than the particles that go to make up large-scale disaster relief. Its good hours are those when terror cramps the heart. The nobilities are given freedom then. Danger past, self returns. There is the monotony of discomfort and overstressed tempers, of dirty clothes and dirty imaginings. The old-time personal animosities—a thousand-and-one Attilas—are again on the rampage. It is then that the miracle just witnessed ends. Selflessness packs her alluring cerements, like a disgruntled and discredited prima donna, and flees the company."

This 1901 flood of Sironia was running true. Alongside it, as news, the final conquest of the Philippines, the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, the assassination of President McKinley and all the rest got in *Sentinel* headlines but scant attention.

Hazel had not followed Miss Carietta's dignified method of handling just about everything from her home by messenger, phone or interview. Instead she demanded and got the City's only warehouse,

had it cleared of routine supplies and stocked with two "walls" of relief food and clothing across the middle. One end, became a men's dormitory, the other a women-and-children's. Between the two supply walls, she headquartered with as few "office" helpers as possible. Her aim was to use every man and woman in town (and not a few children) to the limit of his strength.

She sat now for the fourteenth straight hour behind the scuffed oak desk Bill had "dug up." The warehouse was damp, cold, cavernous, crammed more with "relief smells" than relief supplies. Grimy carefully guarded kerosene lamps burned uneven yellow. Behind her was a hillock of sacked flour, to the right one of salt meat. Donated piles of coats, pants, diapers and other clothing stretched up and out into the gloom from the narrow aisle between her desk and the door to East River-Road.

The skin over sharp features was drawn tight with weariness. The little head of frizzy ginger with green-winged bird-hat was supported on one brown-gloved hand. The other, gloved, too, against the damp chill which smelled of River decay licking at the east foundation, was checking a list of her own scant notes. Begun three days before, it had been constantly added to, pencilled out.

"More bedding"—only partly met, must be left on list. She really ought to get some rest. She really ought not keep poor Bill waiting outside in the surrey any longer, but—

"Cheese *bad!*" It had been sent back to the grocer donating same with notice it must have been "bad for some time. Am sure you'll want to replace it immediately."

"Check T": that meant she had made her daily inspection of Milly Thaxton's work in the Skating-Rink Ward across the River, and found it the best administered of the lot. Lady Stuck-Up could really buckle down, manage "niggras" like an overseer! Hazel didn't know whether she was pleased or displeased. She was too tired to know whether she was pleased with *herself,* much less with her growing respect for Milly Thaxton.

More of this! More of that! Always *more.* There was never enough of anything except Miss Nathalia's India Chutney. Not even on charity, would "they" eat that.

The way people stuffed in *free* food! Families who had thrived for years on starvation diets were gorging themselves, literally gorging, seemed afraid the waters would recede before they busted their guts wide open. If there was one thing to dry up the milk of human kindness and blow it away in bitter dust it was too close observance here. Well, not many things human stay at their best long at a time. Flood Relief did seem to bring out the best in those giving and the worst in those getting. And why not? Those who gave received a lot of satis-

faction out of their own benevolence, and those who got were only having the inequalities of—of things ground into them, sometimes patronizingly. But—damn it!—they might at least keep on *acting* grateful—especially when they'd probably *get* more that way. Was *she* already too worn out to give *anybody* the benefit of the—

"Miz Elliott!" Somebody was shuffling toward her down the gloomy provisions aisle. "Somebody better do sump'n. De ladies whut's stayin' in de ole Skatin' Rink—dey's—dey's complainin' an' carryin' on sump'n awful! Miz Milly done sont me to tell de Mayuh." Catullus stopped, partly for breath, partly for suspense. "But Mistuh Oscar, he say he won't mess wid no bunch o' squabblin' *women*. He say ter see *you*. Dey's fightin' an' killin' each othuh—won' mind a wuhd Miz Milly say—"

"Shut up!" Hazel popped to her feet. "Get word to Miss Trina to take charge *here*." She clopped out of the huge, dark place, hat wobbling. She wasn't tired any more.

"Take me to the Skating Rink, Bill." She clambered into the surrey beside him, and he headed for East Sironia across a bridge almost awash. "Hurry! And don't talk—I've got to think."

It would serve Her Highness right to be left alone, to handle what Hazel had had to contend with for years. But if what-ever-this-was was allowed to go unchecked it would spread. In no time it'd have the whole situation at a boil. No one knew the women of that Ward better than Hazel, nor realized better all they had been through. Many had lost their "things," had to live with the fear of death, sick children, discomfort, evil-smelling monotony—and worst of all they were penned up with other women and without their men. All those so-necessary "rules" they'd never understand! Their questions! *Why* couldn't they, each of them, go wading back into the muck to see what the water had left? *Why* couldn't they do their own cooking in the "dormitory"? *Why*—a thousand whys. She'd always kept the lid on. Milly Thaxton should be left to—

"Stop in front, Bill." Its hulk was black against a sky of clear dark blue, its windows dull squares of smudged orange. The bedlam clatter of high voices poured out, one higher than the rest, but so filled with sharpness as to be unintelligible.

"I'll hitch and go in with—"

"You wait *here*. If you hear me yell 'Police,' get somebody that looks like a policeman—anybody—and wade on in. There's no telling—" She jumped over the wheel while he was cutting it back for her. Brown skirt and pointed, high-buttoned shoes splashed through mud dissolved into thick gravy.

From the small side entrance she could see a stormy ocean of women. Their exit was barred by two armed guards obviously sent

by an invisible Mayor to protect City property. A good thing too! All the women were talking at once, glowering and shoving. One was shouting. This one, a tall dark woman, who might be pretty, was hideous now. Mrs. Milt Temple! Now she could be seen bending forward over a table, and pouring words down onto — Milly Thaxton! Such abuse even Hazel had never heard. Her words were too filthy for a woman to know, much less apply to another. Hazel had never had anything like this.

Miss Milly, as best she could, was ignoring the obscene tirade, continuing her directions for the night. Mrs. Balcom and Mrs. Ballinger were helping her. All three were corpse-pale. The crowd was closing in. Some were excitedly urging Mrs. Temple on. It wasn't so much complaint against flood hardships as against — a Hill Family woman! Foul invective became more and more the outpouring of years of suppressed envy and malice, of wanting to hit back at those better off. And small wonder! This was one of the hussies who'd been mixed up with Jed Hadyn — among others. Jealousy and spite, stifled longing for excitement, these were riding high.

It couldn't be many seconds before Mrs. Temple, so encouraged, would do *more* than rant and glare. What would happen to Milly Thaxton *then*? Hazel wouldn't miss this for a million — ! But when her Bill heard she'd stood by while his friend's wife was being insulted, what *then*? Why didn't the ninny do something beside just keep on working there at her desk without flinching? If anybody had said to Hazel the things that Temple slut was saying to Milly Thaxton — well! But oh, no. Her Highness couldn't soil her patrician hands. Well — Hazel Elliott had no fears about soiling hers!

Not looking, not caring whom she slammed aside, she bored a path to the side door, and sloshed through mud to the surrey. She made one grab and paid no attention to Bill, about to follow her, except, "I can handle this — keep out!"

She literally slammed back into the open center of evilly eager crowd. With one hand she jerked Milly Thaxton, roller chair and all, behind her at the same time the other and its buggy whip lashed out and about her in fury. Square across mouthed obscenities it landed — once — twice — again. Lick after lick came. She retreated just enough to get room to lash again as the Temple devil tried to rush her. Had it been a question of strength, Hazel would have gone down, but under the blinking, indomitable spirit of a little harpy with a whip, the hulking woman faltered. She fumbled to get behind the women crowding her, fell back under the slashing strokes on neck, arms and ankles. Once she crouched for a final rally, but across her head cracked three whacking blows from the whipstock. Sniffling, wiping blood that did not staunch, her voice sank to whimpering, "Please,

please, *ma'am*, Miss Hazel! Please, you're killing me. Cutting me all up. I — I'll have the law on you for — "

"You — " so fast they came, the lashes could not be seen, but heard, they were at least three to each word: " — will?"

"No. No'm, I won't! Just quit — for God's sake — o-oh!" She was back against the wall, head shielded by arms a crisscross of bleeding welts. "Ple-ease — !"

Whip butt thumped to the floor. Hazel still held its upper shaft. She glared at some woman in the solid row of them against the wall. Instantly there was a vacant place which she took, turning to face the crowd. "Stand back!" They did so, about an open semicircle. "*This* is for all of you as much as for — her!" At a rough poke from whipstock, the quivering woman with loosened black hair gave a loud sob. "Shut up! All of you!" There was silence — silence emphasized by a miasma of crowd odors, of unwashed, excited, disappointed, cowed humanity.

They were watching like so many Lipscomb window dummies. The *most* rigid of all still sat where she and her chair had been shoved.

Hazel cleared her throat — a little weak, her voice sounded, now that nervous let-down was at her stomach and knees. "*Nobody's* having much fun out of this flood — except the kids riding drift logs!" That brought some easing of tense faces. "There's just so much food, so much bedding, so much medicine, and — so on. To prevent — even worse, an epidemic of typhoid for one thing, there are rules, and they're going to be obeyed! I'm sure Mrs. Temple and some others would not have acted as they have if they had understood. Listen to me! You '*low*-ground folks' are the ones who really lose by our floods. And they'll keep on coming until there's money from someplace to straighten the 'hairpin,' above town. During the floods, like I said, it's *you* who have to sleep on thin pallets in draughty barns like this, night after night, away from your menfolks, eat mostly the same stuff day after day, and the rest of the time sit around with nothing to do *but* — complain. Still — Mrs. Temple, you forgot one thing! The *high*-ground folks *could* overlook the flood. They *could* leave you to wallow in mud, rustle for food, possibly *get* typhoid! Have they — ever?

"They want no thanks or repayment for what this costs them — and, as meager and uncomfortable as it is, it costs *plenty*. They want no thanks for the hard work — yes, *hard work* they are doing for nothing, for work they'll do again next flood and the flood after that.

"Everyone of us must realize this. Although we're all tired of the whole thing, we can't demand this change or that, *can't* tell the River to go down! We're all ready to drop — to cry, have hysterics, even fight! *I'm* as ready as the next. (She didn't resent, rather welcomed

the slightly disrespectful "Pour it on, Hazel!") There won't be anything more like Mrs. Temple's — misunderstanding, I'm sure. But if there is, *I'll* be back! Now —" She raised the stooping woman cloaked in black hair by an arm, the whip still in plain view. The hair fell away. Even in its present slashed state the face was again pretty, *real* pretty! "Mrs. Temple, you got something to say to Mrs. Thaxton and these other ladies — ain't you?"

All eyes were fixed on her, and did Mrs. Temple know it! Dark hair tossed back. She drew breath deeply. "I'm sorry I acted the — like I did. I apologize to Mrs. Thaxton and you ladies — and I thank Mrs. Elliott!"

"That's the girl!" Hazel's admiration was genuine. She found much more easily understandable sudden fluctuations between emotional extremes than she did unchanging, superior calm. "Now, *please, everybody!* We've got to be sparing with electricity for another day or two. Get the children ready for bed as quick as you can and — and I'll see in the morning what I can do about — making the River go down!" The resulting laughter was friendly, if not very amused.

Mrs. Thaxton slid her chair back to the desk without rising. Already she was handing out bedding checks, making entries as if never interrupted. Hazel could tell she was worn out, but she wasn't giving in. "Good night, Mrs. Thaxton."

"Yes? Oh, good night, Mrs. Elliott — and thank you!" That was all. (But had Hazel expected anything more?)

Muddied skirts slapping at ankles seemed dragging her down. Bill jumped out, this time was allowed to help her in. "What the *hell* happened? I was looking for a shillelagh to join in when things quieted —"

"Hmmph! *You* wouldn't've lasted five minutes in there!" She sagged against him. "Get me home — in a *hurry!*"

CHAPTER II

"IT'S *SURE* GOOD to get back up here."

"Just thinking the same thing." Calvin lay back in the rustic cedar-limb chair, extended his feet luxuriously to the high, orange flames and stroked wind-ruffled mustache. "So much has been happening lately around these parts that—" He looked with unmistakable significance into the next room. There Marshall was performing broiled-steak wonders at his charcoal brazier. Bill nodded, shrugged and waggled red muttonchops helplessly. Calvin finished, "—that I don't believe I've congratulated you on being husband to 'The Guardian Angel of Flood Disaster.'"

"She did do good work. But that 'Guardian Angel' story by Caleb Hone was more to justify *his* judgment in having selected her than anything else. Wish he could've seen the 'angel' *after* I got her home that night. It scared me the way she went to pieces. It was—nice of Miss Milly to nominate—and elect, really—Hazel as President of the *permanent* setup—even if it was all managed so she wouldn't have to meet Hazel face to face."

"Oh, well. Our women — God bless them! And, please, God, give them some commonsense — like You did *us*."

"Amen! Calvin, you haven't heard anything from — Beaumont since I saw you this afternoon?"

"I was just going to ask *you*. If something doesn't come in by tomorrow or next day, one or both of us ought to go over there, have a look a round. I don't for a minute suspect anything — wrong. Oil men are 'doers' — just don't think writing letters important." He tried to increase the confidence in his words. "I've a feeling we'll hear something tomorrow. Even if we don't, there's not a thing to worry about."

"Meaning *you're* getting doubtful. So'm I."

"Now, Bill. Sure, I'm concerned — a little. But — this time tomorrow we'll both be saying we weren't ever worried at all."

"*Or* what jackasses we've been to dump practically everything we've got between us in oil leases!"

"Man, you *are* scared! All right, I'm scared, too. If it should — should go the wrong way, losing the money won't be so bad as — Milly had to economize all her childhood, as you may know, and I'd sure hate to be the cause of her having to again."

"Well, these'll console you." Marshall had barely set two hot toddies on the rustic table near them when both had been grabbed and gulped down. "Looks like us oil millionaires needed those drinks." In a cloud of greasy, mouth-watering smoke, he took the broiler rack from over even red heat, scraped a skillet free of German-fried potatoes into a dish. A china tub was filled with soggy rice. Fried corn pone was done, and the meal was ready. For long, satisfying minutes there was no talk, only the sounds of eating, the muted clank of knives and forks on tin.

"Whatever else 'they say' against you, Marshall," Bill wiped his wide mouth and worked his sideburns as he'd seen a clown do, "anybody that says you can't broil a steak'll have me to whup." He cleaned strong yellow teeth slowly with a steel pick, one of seven attachments on nickel-plated pocketknife. He looked at Calvin.

Calvin bit his upper lip, then nodded silently, almost imperceptibly. "A swell feed in a man's own cabin is a hell of a place to jump him for something, Marshall, but if your friends don't, who will? Somebody's *got* to, Marshall."

"So *that's* why you two cornered Sironia's steak market and just had to have *me* cook 'em! And I was feeling *so* flattered, too. But — go on, Bill."

"It's a man's own business if he feels — a little skittish spell coming on — once in a while. But, hell, Marshall these New Orleans trips of yours are — are — "

"Like I don't know it! Women who wouldn't call on Moira before

are dropping in now—'just passing by'—to sympathize. They say it's their 'bounden duty' to tell her what she already knows—then see how much they can prize out of her. I've a good mind to tell *some* women a thing or two about *their* husbands."

"You're right, Marshall. They've got no right to mix in," Calvin muttered, "but your family and friends have. There's no woman in town I admire and respect more than I do Moira. With Tam coming right along to take over Lipscomb's, will there be any Lipscomb's for him to take over, the money you've been spending the last month or so?"

Marshall could never be sullen for long, certainly not with these two whose motives could not be questioned. "Am I the only one in this town taking chances with property his family's got a share in?"

"No, Marshall!" Bill took over from Calvin. "You showed good sense staying out of the oil deal. But this matter of yours—goes farther—"

"Yes, boys, it does. No fool like an *old* fool. I've always believed that, and now—I guess I've proved it."

"I told Hazel just this morning that if a woman as pretty as this Patsy Garrick started after me, she'd better—"

"You're wrong, Bill." It was his first word of anything like defense. "If she'd *chased* me, I might have tried my luck—but that would have been all. She's been so open and—straight-from-the-shoulder about everything, begged me not to—overdo the thing—"

"Hmmph!" Bill couldn't hold back a snort for Marshall's credibility. "Could her being Old South aristocracy—once, that is—had something to do with it?"

"It's possible. She acts wild and—mercenary, but she—she's not. She's really—really—"

"*Really* got you by the—?"

"Yes, she has. I can't call everything off—wouldn't stick to it if I did. But I *am* going to be a lot more careful about being seen with her—and watch the money, too."

"How'll she like that? Suppose she says you'll have to keep up the old spending or she'll find someone who will—"

"You don't know her. She *won't*."

"I think he'll get the thing worked out some way, Bill. I'll sure help."

"And *just* how," Bill imitated Miss Nathalia, "might that be?"

"Oh, shut up! Let's you and me start in on Bill, Marshall."

"Yeah!" Marshall drew a deep breath. "How about you and your River Road—"

"Cut it out!" Bill was on his feet, crouching like a boxer protecting his face with both clenched fists. "If you've no respect for me, remem-

ber I'm the—husband of 'The Guardian Angel of Flood Disaster'! And—besides," he strutted his version of the Southern colonel around the small, warm room, redolent of fine steak, good smoke and fair whiskey, "the-ah's anothuh lit-tul mat-tuh, one o' puh-sonal on-nuh, suh, upon which I dee-mand sat-us-faeshun! My hosses have been insulted by those stringhalted, spavined bays of Colonel Thaxton, heah, and I—"

"You've said that once too often, Cun'l Elliott, suh," Calvin carried on, "an' let me say on bee-ha'f o' our fair state that I ree-sent the in-sinoo-ashun cast on my fair hawses, suh. They beat you' stringhalted, spavined ole grays fai-uh and squa-uh, suh, an' it does yo' Yankee upbringin' no credit to say they didn't. How-evah—"

"*That's* what I bin waitin' fuh, Cun'l Thaxton—that 'how-evah'!"

"How-evah, as I was sayin' when interrupted, my bays beat yo' nags once, and they can do it when-evuh—if I may say so, suh—and where-evuh you say."

"How 'bout yo' standin' excuse—waitin' for Miss Milly to leave town?"

"Here, you two!" Marshall's grin had been slow in widening after what he'd been put through, himself. "When and if you ever mean business, I'll hold stakes!"

"Marshall has the right idea, Bill. We'll post bets with him tomorrow—No, better not on a Sunday. On Monday, then."

"Where you all want the race—at the Fair Grounds or along River Road west of the North Wagon Bridge? Personally, I think it undignified on the part of our two most prominent and most—*moral*—" he let that sink in, "—citizens and won't be present."

"Hell! You wouldn't miss it for a thousand dollars and you know it"!

"The Fair Grounds suits me," announced Bill with a thump of emptied glass.

"And since my horses can win just as easily at the Fair Grounds as they did on Sironia's *downtown* race course, that suits me." Calvin drained his glass.

"We'll drink to that!" suggested at least two, possibly all three. All drank to it—several times.

"And after my grays've won," Bill was standing by grace of a supporting chair back, "I challenge those hay-burning bays to a second race, them to run their poor best while my matchless grays run—ass-backwards!"

Calvin replied, but Marshall didn't listen. Only he was steady now and thinking: That oil mess must be worse than he had feared, to make these two drink so much more than either ever had up here on the Bluff. All this toasting of their teams and so on was just so

much cover-up. "You chariot drivers better git on home, to go in training, hadn't you?"

"All right, Bill?"

"Suits me. Sure you ain't mad, Marshall? Gotta ride home with me to *prove* you ain't."

"I ain't mad. Can't ride with you and drive my own buggy very well. Besides, Moira and Tammy are bringing some kids up here for a wiener-roast next week and if she finds the place looking like this — look out!"

"We're goner stay and help — ain't we, Calvin?"

"Sure."

"No, you're not, I know help when I see it — and I don't see any."

"All right — all right. You'll regret it. Come, my doomed rival in racing circles!" Calvin threw an arm around Bill's shoulders, missed and clouted him on the head instead. "Show him!" He pointed unsteadily at Marshall. "We must show him what good sportsmanship is — " They went out arm in arm, hats and coats loosely wadded while they sought vocally and loudly and vainly for a key on which both could get all the way through "Old Kentucky Home."

Each went to his span of horses under the shed, took off their blankets and reined back their fine heads. "Don't even look at those hifalutin bays," Bill whispered loudly enough to be heard back in the cabin by Marshall. "It ain't goner be long now before we put 'em in their place — to stay!"

"Didya hear *that?*" Calvin whispered to his span just as loudly. "Mister Elliott just doesn't know, and don't you tell him until we get his money."

Both men laughed whiskily and lurched up to drive off their buggies side by side along the wide road, white in the moon's cold. "I don't know what I'd do, Bill," Calvin called, "if I didn't have these little evenings up here to — balance things. I wouldn't be saying it, though, if I hadn't had a leeeeeetle too much."

"I thought *I* was the only one who felt — that way."

"This is like when — when I was around fifteen or sixteen," he was having to yell across to the other. "In the cool of the evening, the fellows would come for me. There wasn't ever much new to be done. That didn't matter — That's how I feel about you and Marshall — the only two men in town I do feel — feel that way about. Seem to be repeating myself. But *you're* drunker than *I* am! What I mean — I've got two more geno — gen-u-ine friends than lots of men — "

"That's right, Calvin, that right! I'm glad you brung — brang — what the hell — bringed it up now. We sure wouldn't discuss it when sober. I count it among my greatest blessings — hell!" Their wheels had almost locked when each swung away to his side of the road.

"When I think of poor old rich Tom Bly up here at Syringa, all his money and all his women and—and not a *friend* in the world, I—That's the main reason I always speak to him, no matter how he and Hazel carry on."

"We're getting—almos'—sentimental, Bill." Calvin reached for his whip and missed it, decided he didn't want it, anyway. "But I kind of hate to stop."

"You know what? Some of the dirtiest, *lowest*-down tricks ever played on me were bozos I *thought* were my friends! By the time I was heaved off that slow freight on the edge of town, I was three-thri- through with all such foolishness as friendship!" Neither knew he was yelling loudly enough to be heard fifty feet away. "*Through!*"

"Is *that* so? We hit it off—from the first day you dropped in to cash a check and said it was no good. You sure told the truth that time."

"And all the time I was thinking here's where I pull a new one on a sonofabitchin' banker! It wasn't long, though, Calvin, before you and Marshall made an honest man of me. And I sure do 'preciate you giving me trust in humanity. God, I'm drunk!"

"Why, that what you said—*that's* almost beautiful, Bill." Calvin was blinking to keep his eyes open as he braced his back against the seat to stop his telltale sway. "I hope I'm not too—far gone to remember it—I am, though!"

"Never mind, Calvin, my boy. Someday it'll come back to you. And *you'll* say: Old Bill Elliott was drunk as a fool that night, but it took *good* liquor to make him say what he'd been wanting to say a long time. And it'll help, Calvin, even if—" he laughed an embarrassed little grunt at what he'd said, "—even if you don't know a damn thing about horseflesh."

"Sour groops—grapes, Mis-ter Elliott! I knew enough to select, pers'n'ly and individ-uh-ly, this span which licked the daylights out of a team see-lected by that famous connersurr o' hors*emeat*, Mister William *Fitzmaurice*—"

"Damn *you!*"

"—Elliott!"

"Talk's cheap!"

"You're drunk, *Fitzmaurice!*"

"*That's* too much to take *sitting down*." Bill stood up in his speeding buggy. "Calvin Reardon Thaxton, I have the honor to—" he almost fell, caught the back of the seat, "—to challenge you to *put up* or *shut up*. What I mean—we got a level stretch of almost a mile from Coon Creek Bridge here to the big oak this side of Niggertown Bridge—and what could be fairer than that?"

"I think that is a—a *very* fine idea." Calvin stood up, too, so that

he could bow. He fell forward with one hand on the dash. "Are you backing out?" As the other toppled, too.

"I am not. I was just showing I can bow as low as any damn Thaxton that ever lived."

"Fitzmaurice! Get your hind wheels touching that post." Both buggies crossed the flimsy Coon Creek Bridge. With much sawing of reins they backed until Bill's rear wheels banged into the post to their right, and Calvin's, that to their left.

"Who's goner fire the starting gun?"

"As senior — I mean *sober-er* member, I am!" Calvin stood up again and bowed. Bill stood up and bowed. Both wobbled and sat down hard.

All four horses sensed something unusual, something well beyond their usual monotonies of taking ladies shopping and visiting. Maybe something really worthwhile — like that dash down Main and around the Court House the other day. Already they were fretting at control, bumping rumps, tossing handsome heads, teeth rattling against bits.

"Well?" Bill had waited as long as he could.

"Don't get impatient — never get — get — whatever it was I said — *never!* Ready?"

"I been ready two months!"

"That — is beside the point!"

"Why?"

"Because — I'll tell you later. Ready?"

"Been ready for *three* months!"

"Heard you the first time. When I say 'Ready!' like this — 'Ready!' — then *you* say 'Ready!' like this — 'Ready!' Ready?"

"Are you re-hearsing or — ready?"

"Of all the — are *you* ready?"

"Oh, my God!"

"Well, say what you're supposed to! Ready?"

"Ready!"

"No, I got a better way. Now — 'One for the money — two for the show — three to make ready and — four for to — *go!*'"

Both whips cracked. Both teams snapped buggies after them in the lunges forward, flowing smoothly into their long, low racehorse strides. Calvin and Bill braced their feet, sat squarely on their buttocks, elbows against seat backs. The wind rushed past them. It took Calvin's black fedora and then Bill's tan derby. The road gliding toward them, vanishing beneath them, was a white torrent that eager heads and flying manes were piercing, fighting, conquering. Whips rose and fell. Now Bill was shouting, "Come on, Star! Come on, Rabbit! We're winding 'em now. Just you hold it — *hold* it, boys! We're goner *walk* away from 'em! Ho! Ho!"

Calvin saw them draw ahead, laid on the whip more than ever.

The bays responded, but could not get the lead. The whip again. Now the grays were only a little ahead. Bill was singing out something totally lost in the heavy drum of hooves on cloudy white road. The air seemed warm instead of cold. Just ahead the finish-line oak seemed to rear up out of the ground. Both spans felt the final lashes, strained. Faster — faster. The oak was passed with no way of telling which was leading — a tie! But a tie at the finish line neither man recognized. To both came the same flash — *plenty* of room — win, win and leave no doubt about it!

For a time their liquor-amplified voices carried back to Marshall. They were still "on his mind" (as he was to say many, many times the next few weeks and, off and on, the rest of his life) when he locked up and drove off for town. He never knew why he drove on to Niggertown Bridge, a good half-mile out of his way. All he knew was he couldn't turn off at South Wagon Bridge.

The night was getting colder. Its sounds were so familiar as to seem a deathly stillness. This feeling of something wrong, was it due to his having taken on a little too much? If he was going to worry about *those* two every time they took a swig, his life's work was cut out for him. If he hadn't already come so far as to make the other bridge out of the way now, he'd turn back just to —

That piercing, quavering moan — no, scream! Where had it come from, so faint, so unreal, so quickly gone? There it was again. It was one of a recurring series, growing louder. No, not louder, he was getting *nearer*. Lilybeth's latest "man" beating her up? Hardly, with her about to present Mammy with another grandchild. Could *that* be it? Nope, nigger women didn't carry on like the white ones. Something was wrong, *bad* wrong! He whipped Old Blue into a run. That cry — those repeated cries were like — *too* like those he had heard only once in his whole life, those of a horse in both agony and terror. They now had the sweat pouring down his spine. Old Blue had heard, too, reared on hind legs in fear then plunged forward so suddenly he was flung back onto the seat. He laid on the whip, thinking nothing of the ruts, the rocks, the rises and falls in worn road. The moon was partly out. Clumps of willows on either side of the bridge moved in upon him. He was thrown forward as Old Blue stopped. She refused to go on, was shying like she was crazy. From the bridge — one rail, the right-hand one, was gone! Those screams no longer wind-muffled were louder. They came from the creek bed below, too loud almost to be borne. Old Blue was trembling, could not be left unhitched. He drove off the road, put a thicket between her and — what was down there.

Shedding overcoat and hat as he ran, he plunged toward an inferno of sound. There was nothing to be seen except part of that railing, splintered, still swinging. This gave way as he held to it to steady himself. Over the edge and down the twenty feet to the River he made out one limestone bank. It was against this ghostly white that the gloom could no longer conceal tangled black, all still except the wild struggling of one enormous shadow. It was one of the bays, fighting the harness which still held. "Steady, Shiloh — *steady!*"

Marshall had no recollection of his descent. (His hands were a week healing.) He did remember the interlocked, twisted frames, splintered spokes of turning wheels and — both of *them*. Bill lay on his face, where his head had crashed into hard white chalk. Marshall's lacerated hands pressed to crushed chest — no trace of heartbeat. "Bill — !"

Had he cried out? Or was it only Shiloh sniffing the blood again? Calvin — where was Calvin? For an instant hope and prayer joined. Calvin had lived, had gone for help. No — not in a fall which had killed three of the horses, knotted them together. Two were almost completely under water, the third had its neck doubled back, broken clean. Its gray coat was pierced by white, jagged bone —

"Now! Now!" Marshall soothed unconsciously as he stroked the one taut neck. Shiloh's cries subsided. The whites of great eyes still stood out. "Steady! Steady!" All the time he was loosening buckles, then forcing the great, dead bodies away. He slapped Shiloh's quivering flank and the animal heaved up and away on three legs, the left fore held up pitifully.

Both buggies had turned completely over, landed top down. "God!" Calvin had hit the rock first, at water's edge — his buggy pushing, pinning him head down in shallow water. He must be got out. Marshall's coatsleeves tore free as he strained. Nails were bent back from his fingers as he got them under Calvin and straightened, arms still around him. Calvin couldn't be this heavy. No, one foot was caught. Loosened, it let Marshall fall back with him on bank's whiteness.

Marshall began desperately lifting and lowering the body as best he knew to expel water from Calvin's lungs. A trickle, then a short spurt came from the open mouth. Marshall's eyes, become used to darkness, could see. No use now. Not one flicker from the heart, not one from the pulse. Insanely he worked — was going to work on until it killed *him*, too. This — wasn't Calvin any more, this stark profile unrecognizable in its flaccid looseness beneath smears of drenched dark hair.

Twice he must have fainted, twice started again. When at last he gave up, he tried to lower his sagging burden, dropped it. It fell one way, he, the other, crumpled, sobbing weakly.

How long had he lain here? Not long, for the moon was over the same bare willow. He must — what must he do next? With so many things to be done — so many things, some of them as hard, almost, as this — what were they? He couldn't think.

Torn, painful fingers pulling him up the bank left dark stains on white stone. Old Blue reared back at the smell of the blood on his hands. "Steady, girl! Steady — you got to help me — *got* to!"

He must hurry. Hurry? What good hurry *now?* It must be — what time? His watch had stopped. Early morning, as near as he could figure it.

Which first? Milly — then Hazel — then the undertaker? No. Something else was first! He drove the long block to the back slope of Thaxton Hill. "Fred! Fred!" he was crying at one of the old slave-cabin doors.

"Who dat out dere?"

"Mis-ter Marshall." Mustn't get Fred excited. "Come outside."

The old Negro lurched out more nearly awake than a white man would have been, used as he was to sleeping in his clothes, on call by three generations of Thaxtons. "Fo' Gawd, Mistuh Ma'shull! Whuttsa mattuh, Mistuh Ma'shull. Kain't you talk none? You sick?"

"No!" The cramp in his throat let go. "Listen, Fred. Go get Mister Calvin's shotgun — in his gun closet — and two shells. Don't wake *an*ybody!"

"Yassuh — git Old Sho' Shot an' *two* shells. Don't wake *no*body!"

"Then — run to Niggertown Bridge — and shoot Shiloh *if* that fore-leg is broken. If not get him up — somehow — up on the road. Then wait there — with them — I mean Mister Calvin and Mister Bill Elliott. Fred, they're both," he was giving way, himself, "— dead. I'll send the under — "

"Oh, Lawd God," he swung down holding to the buggy, "my Redeemer in heaben — "

"Stay on your feet. No *time* to pray. Go *straight* there."

The tight kinked knob of head bowed. Then the old man started up the hill to the house in a low run surprising for his age. Marshall lashed Old Blue into a gallop down empty, moon-gray Main to North Storrow. Here at last was someone *ready* for disaster.

He and Old Blue trailed Robards, the undertaker, and his apprentice in their boxlike black wagon. He helped them every way he could, past exhaustion now, past tears, past grieving. He watched the little doors in the end of the wagon close, could see both of *them* even after the wagon had vanished toward Robards' Funeral Parlor.

"Shiloh's all right. Kin I take 'im back home now, Mistuh Ma'shull?"

"No. Tie him — there!" Fred mustn't be free to start talking yet. Milly and Hazel must learn of this from Marshall. He mustn't shirk in spite of all the excuses crowding him. "I'll need you, Fred, to mind Old Blue."

They drove up to Main. There was not a light up there in the whole be-columned bulk. Waken Milly now? Robards had said it was two-fifteen. She'd need all the sleep she could get —

"Whin yuh goner tell Miz Milly?"

"I don't know. There's nothing she can do, and she might insist on seeing him before — "

"Dat's right, an' dey won't be no persuadin', no stoppin' 'er, neethuh."

"I'll drive by Elliotts'. I've a hunch Miss Hazel's up — "

"Melissa say she don't nevuh go to sleep whin he's out. I bet she bin walkin' de floor thinkin' things whut ain't true — dis time. Mistuh Ma'shull, you bettuh tell her — caih-ful like — "

"Isn't that a light — through the trees in the Elliotts' upstairs?"

"Hit sho' is. You wants me and Blue to wait in de drive, in front or — ?"

"Neither one. Blue's quieted down. You come along with me. Might need to send word — "

Hazel answered the doorbell almost instantly. A black cap partly hid skimpy red slicked back in kid curlers on the narrow skull. Her beak nose fairly jumped from between frantic, greenish eyes. "Marshall? I knew it — I knew it! Bill's hurt — take me to him — " She was already out of the door, black moiré dressing gown held over bony little chest and ruffled white nightgown.

"Not yet, Hazel. There *has* been an accident. Fred, sit here in the vestibule — and don't you leave for a *second*."

"No, suh."

"Marshall, I demand — "

"In the library, Hazel." He walked ahead to switch on the large golden-globed lamp on the center table. The reds and browns of the cold room seemed to gather warmth with color.

"It's — *worse*, isn't it, Marshall?" Wizened and cronelike she was almost beneath his chin, eyes ripping at what he knew. "I knew it — I knew — "

He sat her down, lost in great brown chair, and began, "He and Calvin left the cabin — a little before midnight. I think they must have been racing. Their wheels got locked — at Niggertown Bridge. Both — went over. Both were — Bill, instantly! Calvin — drowned, I think — under the grays — "

"Oh-o-oh!" She would have pitched to the floor head-first if he hadn't caught her by the shoulders, held her in the chair. He hadn't

meant to tell her this way. How had he meant to? He'd forgotten. If he could only get her upstairs — but if he sent Fred for Charlotte, the news would be to Milly before —

"Dead!" Hazel sprang to her feet and screamed, "God, You had no *right* to do it. Bill was all I had, all — all! *You* had no right to!" She shoved Marshall aside, rushed across the room to beat her forehead against the brick mantel and tear at metal-held hair knots.

"Hazel, please. I *beg* you *not* to — "

She didn't even look at him. Blasphemy poured from twisting mouth in a stream of violent denial. The only silences followed pained gasps for air and sudden spasmodic jerking at clothing, furniture, whatever hand touched. One dark red portière was torn down. Books, card tray, everything was swept from the center table except the electric lamp Marshall held, shielded from her. Her black silk robe was in strings. Sofa pillows, vases, albums, strewed the floor. When a Bly chose to show his grief like this, Marshall had heard and forgotten, there was no stopping him.

He took post on the far side of the table, still holding the lamp. He couldn't leave, must be here if she tried to kill herself. Suppose she outlasted him. With all he'd been through before, his hands thick wads of pain, that wouldn't take long. Each time she tried to rush past him, he shoved her back and let go. She must not be alone — yet.

Seconds — minutes — hours he waited. And yet — it was not day yet, for the windows were still black. She was staggering more, becoming more stupefied, more incoherent. She, too, was wearing down.

He waited until she caught a bare foot on a chair leg and fell toward the cold grate. He lowered the unearthly lightness of her back into the same chair, and knelt beside her.

"Lie back, Hazel!" He spoke demandingly, not yet did he dare be gentle. "Farther. Do as I tell you. That's better. Let yourself go limp — all over. Quit jerking!"

"Yes, Marshall, yes, I know — I know. I'll be all right now. You don't know — you *can't* know how — " she was crying softly, " — *how* I loved him!"

"Yes, I can. And I know how much he loved you. Believe me, Hazel, Bill wouldn't want you to — to take it like — "

"No — he didn't *ever* like his 'Old Lady' to — act this way — "

"I'll have Fred get Charlotte."

"No. I want *complete* hold of myself before anyone else sees me. *When* can I see *him?*"

"Mister Robards will send word. You'd want to remember him at his best."

"Oh, yes, yes — my beautiful, *beautiful* — talk, Marshall! Talk to me!"

"May I tell you something I want to — more than anything right now?"

Her head lolled weakly toward him as he knelt. Her eyes were red and dry. "What, Marshall?"

"It's that — in time — maybe, a *long* time — I am sure that one of our greatest consolations for tonight will be that they — went *together* — and enjoying themselves." It was as if a warm breeze swept in to fill the room. "Will be together — through all eternity!"

"Marshall, do you feel, too, they are here — *now?* That somehow they helped you say that?"

"Yes!" Haggard face for a moment was rid of weariness. "And I'm glad. What I'm trying to ask is what I want — with all my heart. Can't their funeral services be held — together?"

"Oh, yes, *yes,* Marshall! But what about — ?" She did not have to finish.

"All of us thought more of Mister Calvin than we can say, more, I'm sure, than we know. But we must not let our grief make things harder for Miss Milly." Yonder came the first streak of dawn, over behind the Court House! "Mammy, you and Fred are to tell the rest of the niggers. If they feel they've got to begin wailing, see that they get out of earshot to do it. I don't want Miss Milly to hear a sound from out here. See to it, Mammy, before you go back to Hadyn Hill. Not a sound!"

"If dey *is,*" Mammy's kindly black face was slowly dissolving about streaming eyes, "I'll give 'em sump'n to cry *'bout!* She won't — " she ground black chins down into thick neck to stifle the grief shaking her all over, " — heah nothin', de po' lamb." She threw wide white apron up over her head and squatted down, shaking, silent.

"Fred, go through the house and let me in the front." Such formality seemed foolish. No, not here on this hill.

Marshall went around, torn between one desire to keep on downtown and another to bear this with her. Abruptly, the brass knocker's fall reverberated, many times louder in the cold silence. Why had he used it? He didn't know.

Old Fred let him in. Without a word he led the way to the right to light the library fire, already laid. Its wadded paper caught, then splintered kindling. It brought out the Aubusson carpet's green and the books the lone gas jet hadn't — and a little warmth. "Just tell her I'm waiting — don't let on why!"

Fred's eyes walled his way. Matted white head ducked low, and he closed the folding doors to the hall. Slow climb up the stair was

audible, was taking forever in unbearable quiet. *That* was Fred's knock on the door. Presently the murmur of voices came, one low, then suddenly strained, high-pitched.

Marshall heard her door open, her step on the stair with the rustle of silk. He rose and opened the doors. All he saw was dark robe, gray hair hanging and, most of all, the questions in her eyes. "Fred said you only asked for *me*. Shan't I have him call Calvin?"

"No, Milly — no. Sit down — you know I wouldn't have come like this if it wasn't — wasn't — "

"Marshall! It's Launcelot. Someone's *dared* to — "

"No, Milly. It's about — last night. The three of us were up at my cabin — "

"Ye-es. Calvin said you-all might be later than usual, for me to get to bed early. Hasn't he come in?"

"No. He and Bill — had an accident — at the bridge." He tilted his head northward. "A railing broke — both teams fell — "

"I'll be ready to go in a minute."

"Wait, Milly. We *can't* go to Calvin — yet."

"Oh — he's in the operating room! We can wait outside. Afterward they'll want him to rest, I know — "

"He's — at rest."

Understanding came only as she searched his eyes slowly. Now it was complete. Automatically she reclosed the doors carefully, came back to the fire and let herself down in the deep-cushioned, gold brocade chair he held for her. She looked up at him — waiting.

"Calvin fell — first. Neither had any — chance. I shouldn't have let them leave without me — "

"Don't say that, Marshall!" She was composed, composed and fading away. "Don't ever say anything should have been some other way. The way it *is* is the right way. We've *got* to believe that — cling to it — or go completely insane!" Petal-like upper lips trembled once — just once. "Is — is he — " her nails had torn into gold brocade, "— badly disfigured?"

"No, Calvin isn't."

"Thank you, Marshall. Is there anything else which needs to be said — or done — *now?*"

"Nothing else. Get all the rest you can. You'll need it. Who'll I get to come over? People will start calling as soon as it's daylight good. Everybody loved or liked him — "

"Yes — everybody knew what a fine man he was — except *me!*" Tiny handkerchief was jammed to her lips not quite in time to still all their soft spasm.

"Nobody ever appreciates a man like him as much as he deserves. When you feel equal to making plans, send me word and — "

"It — it can't be for three or four days, Marshall — there's so many to get word to and wait on." She asked him with a slow gesture to sit opposite her across the fire. "I'd rather not be — alone — for a *few* minutes yet, while I decide how to tell our boy."

He sat down, doubtful about what to do. "All these relatives, Milly, there must be close to a hundred, if they all come — and they usually do. Only those in Sironia were really close to Calvin. And the time between — the time waiting for the funeral is hardest of all on those who — have to go on living. Milly, why can't the funeral be tomorrow?"

"You are thinking of me — as always, Marshall. What you say is true — but I haven't the right to deny Calvin a Thaxton funeral."

"Milly, I was hoping — I'm sorry. You shouldn't try to make plans yet."

"What were you going to say — what is it you were hoping?"

There was no evading it now. He was both sorry and glad. "Before I came here, I called to tell Hazel — "

"Oh, Marshall!"

"Her lights were on — yours weren't."

"How'd she — take it?"

"She's all right — *now*."

"I see. For once, I envy a Bly, wish I could let go and — and, for a second I thought I — I — "

"What I was hoping, Milly — Calvin and Bill were *real* friends — mine, too. I can't help believing you'll want their church services held together as much as I do. Hazel has already agreed, if — "

"She — *would!*" Milly faced his amazement and hurt implacably. "Calvin had some ideas I never understood. It is *quite* possible *he* would like the services held — jointly. And while I may make certain concessions to Calvin's wide friendship — at some future time — there are other and stronger considerations which make — what you have just suggested — *out of the question!*"

That was all there was to it — except the punishing trip he had to make back up Main.

"'Might have known!" Hazel was a little gnome, wrung free of all passion. "I never really counted on it — as touched as I was by — by — When will the Thaxton services be held?"

"'Not before Wednesday. Even if all the blood kin can get here beforehand, they always wait at least four days — "

"At the *very* least! Bill Elliott has no blood kin with enough railroad fare to come if they wanted to! *His* funeral will be tomorrow." And so implicit was it in her tight lips, she might as well have spoken aloud: Bill's will come *first!*

A week had passed, the one that had seen both services. Again in the Elliott library the same two sat, in the same brown leather chairs. In late February afternoon light, there was ravaged weariness on both faces.

"I must say, Hazel, you are bearing up remarkably well. I mean it."

"Think so? Thank you for so much, and, more than anything, for the little — faith I have left. The rest, I think, will come back — someday."

"Yes, Hazel. You are well past the worst part. I guess it's true: 'misfortunes don't come singly.'"

"They never have to me." She picked absently at dull black wool that washed every hint of animation from her, then rose. "Don't get up, Marshall." She walked to the front window, not to see anything, only because she could no longer sit. "It's — wonderful of you to offer to help me keep the home." Desiccated, clawlike little hands encompassed all of "Elliott's Hotel" without turning to face him. "But we hadn't lived here long enough for it to mean anything — the way Syringa does — *did!* It would only be a constant reminder of all I've lost. It would be burying the living with the dead — and, unlike *your* Hill Families, I don't think that's right. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life here," thin lips obviously relished the taste of malicious truth, "as another of Sironia's living tombstones."

"But you will let me help — *whatever* you may decide to — "

"*I* won't need help, Marshall. But it's because of all you've done that I sent for you. Everybody in town, I think, has asked what my 'plans' are. They don't mean to be — a nuisance, but they are. I've done the same thing, but I won't ever again. You can help me by satisfying the town's — interest." She still stood, had her every move well in mind, gave them to him without any sign of an emotional break: The second shock had come just before Bill's services began. She had, fortunately, been too dazed to care. What did it matter now if Calvin's and Bill's Beaumont leases had proved to be on lands where there was no oil, while Mister Jalloux's held all the *producing* wells? What if all that Bill and Calvin had put into it and the great deal more they had gone security for — what if all of it was lost, had sucked just about everything they had down with it? Her orders to proceed with the funeral, in the face of excited suggestion to postpone it, to "rest," her rigidity throughout the long, tuberose-stifled service had been taken for defiance by some, lack of sense by others. It wasn't either. It was just a complete suspension of all such unnecessary things as — thoughts. Later she *had* thought — for days and nights together. The home was to be sold to one of the families rising rapidly in Sironia. They were welcome to it! At first, she had thought the Rogans would buy it, but Selma Rogan would never be satisfied

until she got one of the Hill Homes to satisfy her kinship. Hazel was being paid cash for her equity in the home — enough to make a sizable dent in Bill's debts. In other ways, she'd see the balance of them were paid off. It would take time, but the day would come when those who were saying now, "Well, what can you expect of a hobo kicked off a circus train?" would have to shut up.

"You don't have to punish yourself, put up everything you have left. *You* have rights — "

She knew that. Her only goal now was a clean slate for Bill. The other stockholders of the lumber yard and the Mill had agreed to let her put in a kind of employees' welfare program — annual picnics — weekly square dances — treating minor cuts — things like that. They were letting her use a cottage they had had to take back, that three-room green one across Fourth Street from Hadyn Hill. She was moving tomorrow, Monday. "Tell Moira, Marshall. You and *she* have been my — towers of strength!" She looked at him searchingly, waited pointedly.

"Moira's — all right!"

"Hmmph! Is it true you were able to find enough in Calvin Thaxton's estate to pay off completely his part of the Beaumont obligation, and still leave her the home and enough to go on?"

"I must answer that, although it's *her* business!" He watched for a rising tinge of embarrassment from the high, tight black collar, but none came. "Some are saying that I am keeping up the Thaxtons. I am *not!*" Strong-featured, florid face turned fully to her. "I did offer. Like you, she would accept nothing in the way of financial help from me — or from anyone else. From General Elijah, she inherited a little something. It may be enough with very careful management, but I doubt it. Yes, she gets to keep the home."

"Well, it only goes to show the truth's never as interesting as the reports. But I'll help spread it. It'll be a pleasure to disappoint Nanette Lane and Selma Rogan. You know it's a funny thing — in spite of what I think of Milly Thaxton — and I needn't go into *that!* — I'm relieved things are no worse for her. If she had to work, the way I am going to have to, I think it would be like — I don't know what. Can't expect you to understand, because I don't, myself. Be sure to tell Moira my *new* 'hotel' will be open to both of you any time, my dear." It was strange to see tears of softness between lizard-like, inflamed lids, "But you mustn't expect 'scalloped oysters'!" Both were smiling, both crying as he left.

He jammed black felt so low its crease disappeared. Twilight was closing in, darker than it would be at eight in summer.

Two blocks off, through winter-stripped trees appeared the observatory flat over white columns of Thaxton Hill.

Would Milly be like those of an earlier Hill Family who, faced with an even more violent reversal, had revealed the necessary strength? Or would she, like some others, make a brave show only at first, then find excuse for accepting, and later expecting, as her right, help from "social inferiors"? Marshall was sure he knew.

The nearer he came, the higher her Hill seemed to soar above him, the more able to stand by its own strength. Who would dare try to take it from her? He had meant to stop by, but it was not her arrogant indomitability that he wanted to be with. He'd hate to see that taken — no, beaten from her by the years that seemed to have been waiting so long.

The woman about whom he was concerned was just then crossing the upper hallway to open the door to Lance's room. Since Calvin's death she had felt too close to her boy to knock even. "What're you — looking up, honey?" Gently she put an arm about the seated boy's wide shoulders in dark blue velvet.

"Trying to find what kind of bird it was me and Gum — I mean — Gum and I flushed today up on North Fork — "

"Dear, when speaking of a niggra don't put him first!"

"But you said never to say 'I' first!"

"I know, dear. Just — say — the kind of bird I flushed *with Gum* today." She slid a hand down along strong velvet-sleeved arms to his hands, laid her cheek against long, waving hair, then stood away a little. He didn't like too much babying. "What kind of bird — I mean how did it look, dear?"

"That's not what's bothering me, Mo-other. Gum's gone off someplace. He didn't tell me he was going — or when he'd be back."

"Oh, my darling!" She had to kiss the clean limned brow. "You remember, dear. Gum doesn't work for us — any more. He comes to see you whenever he can. But he should have told you when he'll be back. I'll see he doesn't forget again."

"No, Mo-other, *don't!* Gum's — afraid of you."

"Now, Launcelot. He just knows his place, that's all. It's a relief to have the Hill to ourselves. Josie'll be in — to help out when I need her. She's in the kitchen now — "

"Jo-sie!"

"What're you smiling at, dear?"

"I didn't know I was — smiling. I'm sorry I — "

"That's *all* right. You and Mother can *say* nothing and exchange more ideas than most people who talk, talk all the time — "

CHAPTER 12

THE DOOR to Marshall's office was flung open by a panting Miss Irma. For her to leave the "May Sale" of yard goods, catastrophe must be imminent.

"Excuse me, Marshall." Steel-rim spectacles were sliding down thin, brightly perspiring nose, as she rested back against the door. "I shouldn't have burst in this way — really, I shouldn't!"

"What is it, Irma?"

"It's — it's that Tom Bly! He's out front in his buggy — sent Catullus in. Wants *you* to come out. Oh, I just know — "

"I don't think there's anything to be excited about." Damn — if every clerk in the store hadn't heard about his taking Patsy Garrick away from Young Tom and wasn't expecting a shooting! "And thank you, Irma." She nodded jerkily. Her specs slid off the end of her nose. Then she left.

Deliberately Marshall appended to the order he had been making up for his New York buyer of chinaware "Yr obedient servant," signed

and sealed it, then addressed the envelope. Was poor, life-detoured Irma correct in fearing something sensational was about to happen? He still didn't think so. It wasn't like Tom to waste time or effort over a woman. True, all the loose-lipped talk around town might have gotten under his skin. Hurt sex-pride made men do strange things. Marshall considered. He could play safe and take his pistol. Allowing for his own temper it would make trouble just that much more likely. True, Tom was an expert marksman, but he wouldn't want to be mixed up in a Main Street killing any more than Marshall *wanted* to be the corpse therein! He put on his black felt, and strode up the long aisle of hardware items. Pointedly he lifted his coattail for his handkerchief. At least ten clerks had noted he was unarmed. He heard a sharp breath of admiration. Irma was 'way over in "Hardware." Probably recruiting a rescue squad!

"Get in, Marshall." Young Tom cut the storm buggy's wheel so that the step was clear. His blooded, copper-colored mare pranced off with them. Toward a more suitable location? "Surprised?"

"Yes, I am. When you want to see anybody, you usually send a royal summons to appear up at your castle. Preferably after dark."

Sallow skin crinkled over plainly outlined skull in what seemed a grimace of pain. It was, however, one of his rare shows of amusement. "Second question: Did you think it might be about a certain space-toothed brunette?"

"*Is* it?"

"Hell, *no!* But I *am* wondering if you *know* all she is capable of when she *really* wants something."

"You are — out of pure friendliness," Marshall flipped his eyes sharply at the other's dried-up face and hair-crimps, "— warning me?"

"Not — exactly. I only mentioned her to clear up any doubts you might have about my feelings in the matter. Someday you may even understand why I am grateful to you. There was a time when I couldn't have given her up. *Now* — and you must believe this, Marshall — nothing could matter *less*." He reined the mare, burnished copper in bright cool May light, down to River Road, then let her slow to a walk. He cleared his throat nervously twice. "As you once intimated, I do relish a certain air of mystery. What I want to see you about is the Thaxton-Elliott — débâcle. Personally, Calvin and Bill were all right — each in his own way — I suppose. As *business*men they weren't ever as shrewd as they thought they were. Patsy introduced Jalloux to me before he ever went to them. I turned his goldbrick down cold! There's oil in Texas but none will flow *past* Monsewer Jalloux! If *they'd* had any sense — !"

"They were my best friends, Tom. I'd rather you didn't — gloat over what's happened."

"Commendable, *very* commendable. But you must know that they both thought I had passed up a sure thing and did some — gloating at *my* expense. I pass up a lot of things, Marshall, but manage to keep my principal intact — as much as I throw away on things Calvin disapproved of. Luck — no doubt!" Thin-lipped smirk was a strange compound of simple, almost boyish pride and complex, quite mature malice. "It isn't of them, either, I meant to speak. On the occasion of your December call at Syringa, you may remember there was a chance I might marry. There isn't any longer — " Speech seemed to have deserted him.

"And in view of *that* — whatchamaycallit — debacle — ?"

"Yes! Would a series of loans to Milly Thaxton — anonymous as hell! — be in order, do you think?"

"I made a similar offer. It was refused — I'm tempted to say, abruptly."

Bony, sick-fish hands went up in futility. "So she has *false* pride, too! Tell me: Do you believe, as everyone's saying, she's still wanting, *scheming* to marry Lance off? It doesn't seem possible she could be so blinded to — "

"I'll ask her about the *loan* — 'anonymous as hell' — and let you know."

If Young Tom noticed the rebuff, there was no sign of it. He began suddenly talking of business conditions, present and in prospect.

Marshall called at Thaxton Hill late that afternoon for another of the little visits that "for the look of things" must soon be discontinued. With the excuse of advising her about Calvin's muddled affairs, these calls were "understood" in Sironia. But he had been dead over three months now. Already Carietta Storrow had let fall a "word or two" so that it would get back to him in record time. Nanette and Selma had gone much farther. This cup of tea would be one of the last for just the two of them.

He'd miss the front parlor's familiar golds and blues, the cypress-block firelight reflected by old mahogany. Lance sat handsome, even beautiful watching his mother, frowning or smiling as she did.

"I wonder if Lance isn't anxious to get back to his — egg collection?"

"Oh, I — expect he is. Lance, dear, would you like to be excused?"

"Oh, *yes*, Mo-other, more than anything in the world!"

"Lance!" She laughed softly and tenderly. "We know how you feel. Mister Marshall has often wanted to get away from tiresome tittle-tattle, but he's never said so — so openly, have you, Marshall? You may go, my son. Ask Josie what time supper is — and be here on time."

Marshall closed the door Lance had forgotten in his eagerness. He

flung out the black tails of frock coat donned for these occasions, and took the chair next heavy fringe of blue mantel drapery. "Milly, there's someone who would like to be of assistance to you — on a strictly business basis, if you wish — "

"So?" Not often had he seen her as surprised as this. "Aren't you going to tell me who — ?"

"Not unless there is some chance of your accepting."

"Suppose I say there is — just to find out?"

"You won't."

"Not — after *that!* No, Marshall, there's no chance — at least, not yet. What I may *have* to do later, who can say? But I can't tell you how much I — " The invincible Millicent Letitia Thaxton Thaxton was weeping silently into a bit of cambric never meant for such service. He waited. Soon she was over it. "I have Lance to depend on, you know. He'll be marrying before long — if he can *ever* settle down to *one* girl — that boy! Probably, I'm *so* afraid, to one of these always after him. But more of that *later* — we're still in mourning."

"Milly! Such plans as that can only bring both of you — "

"Marshall!" She had sat erect, all softness gone, in a way — terrifying. "You've been listening to Selma Rogan's gossip? No — Nanette's, then! Both have always been envious of me, know they can't hurt me except through such deliberate falsehoods as those. It — it's unworthy of you to pay them any mind."

"Rather than hurt *you*, Milly, I'd — I'd — "

"I know. Have *faith* in my son and me, Marshall. I — expect to be criticized for some of the things I have in mind — be called 'a marrying mother' — how I *hate* the term! But — you know Calvin wouldn't want our son denied his rights because he's — he's not the kind to *push* himself. And as nearly as I can give them to him, he *will* have them!"

"Yes, Milly. I've never doubted that."

"You and Nelia run on 'long now. Do lak I tells yuh!" Mammy Henderson's rolling gait carried her from dishpan to china closet and back in the great Hadyn kitchen. "You's spoilin' me, he'pin' so much wid de wuk. You *knows* Marse Jed would'n' lak hit!"

"But it's the only way I *can* deceive my husband!"

"Dar you goes!' Both kept on in the lingering aromas of fresh farm sausage, watermelon pickle and a great deal more. Three-year-old Nelia proudly strutted back and forth with the same plate. "Folks dey says to me, 'Miz Trina's too serrous-minded' an' I tells 'em, 'she ain't no sech of a thing.' "

"Thanks, Mammy. This town'll never get over his marrying me — when he could've had any girl he wanted."

"He got de one fer 'im, if you axes me. He knowed dey's lots mo' to ma'iage dan — jus' whut *some* folks think!"

"Mammy!"

"Hit's de Lawd's own trufe. Mistuh Jed, he needed hisse'f a wife he could count on — an' he wint out an' got hisse'f one."

"This'un's dry." Nelia held up the plate she had been hugging to fat little bosom so long, had dropped only once. "Gimme nuther'un tuh wash'n'dry, Triny."

"Here, honey." Trina took the finger-soiled plate and handed her a cup. Nelia got to work furiously with a piece of dishrag.

"Nelia's jus' crazy 'bout you, Miz Trina. An' *no*body could be sweeter to 'er. Whin I thinks how dat Ole Miss Nettie used to pay her no mind 'tall 'cep'n when Mistuh Jed was lookin', I gits ter simmerin' inside — "

"Now, Mammy! *Poor* Cousin Nettie gave up a great deal to come here, left her nice home and, and we mustn't be too hard on her. You never have told me *why* you hate her so. Too bossy?"

" 'Mongst *othah* things. She mought mention 'em, but I sho' ain't!"

"Mammy, you ought to be *ashamed* of yourself!"

"How 'bout *her?*"

"T-t-t! Did — did Mister Jed send word back by one of the hands — ?"

"No'm, I'd'a' tole you right off."

"He's working so hard. October's always busy. I wish he'd let me help with the farm accounts — or something — now — now that I'm no use as a — "

"Now, now! Le's us not talk 'bout — *dat.*" The billowy old Negress laid down the china meat platter with all the little rosebuds on it, wiped damp hands on apron over dingy gray dress, and came close. Hit looked like she were tuning up to need Mammy's shoulder again, the best crying-pillow there was. "Lak I tole you: doctuhs don't know *ha'f* dey claims. I won't let *none* of 'em come neah my house — 'cep'n once in a while. Mo'ovah, dey didn't have *no* business tellin' you, no how. Hit's all foolishment, sayin' you kain't have no more babies, jus' 'cause yo' fust were borned daid. I lost my fust *three!*" Wise old eyes searched girlish pallor, decided the exaggerated account had done some good. The poor lamb was about cried out, had cried enough these last three weeks to wear down a real healthy person, which Miss Trina wouldn't never be. And the worst part had been Marse Jed. He had done all *he* could, but just wasn't, deep down in his heart, able to care. The Hadyns always wanted boys, live ones, not no dead one. He hadn't looked at the pitiful, still little lump of raw flesh

until he'd had to. Mammy understood, had held the lifeless little mite so Marse Jed's face would be turned from all the others when he had. Only she knew he *hadn't;* had kept both eyes shut tight. (Only she knew what ailed Mister Jed was that there Miz Laurine there'd been so much talk about for a time—and now, for months, none at all.)

"'Bout through, Mammy? Let the children come on in and play with me. I get as much fun out of it as they do."

"Sho do!" Mammy moved onto the back porch and along it to the door of the "storeroom." She unbolted the door and children seemed to tumble out of the room over-heated by a clay brazier of charcoal for sad-irons. One was Luella, her sweet face flat, black and shining for "play-time." Another was Jared, two years younger, already foretelling his light mulatto seriousness in maturity. Next was Leah. She was the same age as Nelia, almost as white.

"All right, you-all. You bin nice and quiet an' kin play wid Miz Trina an' Nelia in de kitchen a while—onn-less you gits ob-strep-russ. You knows whut I'll give you if you does." She looked down at eyes walled up white and swimming. "Not you, Luella. You's always good. Whar at's Bennie, my baby-chick?" She found Lilybeth's three-year-old and blackest of all hiding behind a churn, spanked him tenderly. "*You's* de one I means!" Mammy loved the latest and liveliest of her grandchildren most of all—almost. Holding him across a huge hip with one arm and with the other hand picking up the charcoal brazier by its handle, she moved as fast as her bulk would let her back into the kitchen.

Miss Trina had already spread out "de play-quilt." It was a patchwork of Hadyn dress scraps each of which told a story only Mammy remembered now. Seated in the circle, the anemic Trina began trying to teach them to play a game. Navy beans were placed in squares drawn on a piece of wrapping paper. Only Jared seemed to catch on.

"Bettuh put off *dat* game, Miz Trina." Mammy came in with Bennie. "Most of 'em's too young yit—"

"I ain't—*is* I?"

"No, Luella." Mammy's free fingers rubbed tight, dry little plaits tied with string. "Not exac'ly—but de res' o' dese here babies—"

"I ain't no baby."

"All right, Ja'ed, you's a big man. You's too big to play games wid *chillun*."

Thin yellow face became troubled. "Now, Jared!" Miss Trina smiled at him and all his troubles were gone. "You tell us what to play."

"Lemme see!" Jared took his time answering, wanted to be sure he was right.

This was not Luella's way. "Kain't *none* o' you ketch me!" She ran behind the big cookstove.

Jared wriggled free of loose, thin arms to chase Luella. Nelia, dark eyes bright with lamplight, toddled after, Leah right behind her. Bennie sat quietly for a wonder, in a big padded dishpan where Mammy had put him close beside her " 'caze he look so cute!"

In her rocking chair in one corner of the big kitchen, she began sorting dry beans. The specked ones were for beanbags for the children, the good ones for a night's slow cooking. Soon she must bundle her little Bennie-Chicken up against the chill, and with Luella and Jared go to her cabin, almost a mile away.

"Did I ever play like this, Mammy?"

"Lemme see, Miz Trina. Dey's been so many I fergits."

"Mister Jed, then? Forget about him?"

"No, ma'am! Nobody goner git dat chile mixed wid nobody! He stirred things up whinn he was borned-ed and done kept 'em stirrin' evuh since. But wouldn't one of us want 'im any diff-unt, would—" Here the running game had interfered. Both Trina and Mammy were kept busy picking up toppled little bodies and rubbing injured parts well. Nelia tottered off to one side, let go and plopped down backward. No sooner had she done so, than Leah did the same, and began smoothing Nelia's dress.

"Where'd she learn to do that, Mammy?"

"I—done tole 'er she goner be Miz Ca'ietta's body-suhvant whin she grow up an' kin practice on Nelia."

"Oh, Mammy, it's too soon to start—that. There'll be so much time—later on—"

"De earlier dey stahts, de easier hit is. Dey's got lots to learn 'bout—de way things is—"

"Cousin Nathalia used to say I loved you more than I did her—but it was because you were so much closer to me than she can ever let herself get. I'm sure she'd like to be down here with us now,—but she just *couldn't* sit here in the kitchen—like this. Not if her life depended on it! She says you raise the 'smartest and most respectful darkies being raised nowadays.' And you do, Mammy."

"Yes'm, I does. All but *dat* Lilybeth! I sp'iled 'er an' I got nobody but myse'f to blame. She come right after two o' my babies—one right after t'other—had died in infamy. I jus' couldn' be real strict wid her. And right off she knowed it. No mattuh whut she do—no mattuh how I lays 'er out fer doin' it, she knows all she gotter do is put her arms 'roun' mah neck an' say, 'I'se *so-o* sorry, Mammy!' "

"Maybe, she'll marry one of her beaus some day and settle down—be like the rest of you Hendersons."

"Dey all—neahly all—axes 'er—cep'n de onliest one she ever

reely *loved*." Trina saw soft eyes rest on Jared, but suspected no connection. "*Dat's* trouble, Miz Trina! An' hit's mo' of'en trouble dat makes us bus' loose dann hit is nachul wildness. Lilybeth ain't *reely* — bad."

"No — I don't think anybody is."

"Dat's becaws you's so good."

"If I am, you ought to have the credit. Remember when I was about twelve and just beginning to know I couldn't ever be the society belle all Hill Family girls are supposed to be?"

"Like 'twas yistiddy!" Mammy smiled down softly into the clacking beans. "Miz Nathalia's a good 'oman, but she were tryin' to make you some'n you wa'n't meant to be."

"*You* told me the truth — made me cry, but — you're still helping me, Mammy." She did not have to explain.

"We all haves our troubles — an' it's de ones dat does de bestes' wid de mostes' troubles dat sets up highest on de glory-seat! Dat's a hymn I almos' writ once."

"Mammy." Trina took the prattling Leah in her lap to dry perspiration from the roots of slightly kinky brown hair. "What's this precious child 'meant to be'?"

The stubby, wrinkled black fingers did not pause in their sorting, nor was the light plunk of beans in tin pans interrupted. "You done heered Miz Ca'ietta say!"

"Oh, bother Cousin Carietta!" She saw Mammy trying to smother a pleased smile. "Leah," and as the child looked up at her name Trina held her closer, put one of her hands alongside the child's, "is practically white. I just don't think it's fair she should be raised as — something she isn't."

"I've thought a heap 'bout dat, Miz Trina." Mammy's slow, sighing voice was quieting. "I done come to de conn-clusion dat thinkin' 'bout *dat* don't he'p none."

"I don't agree with you, Mammy. It makes me sick all over to think of — " she nodded her head downward, " — growing up as body-servant to anybody."

"Hit's goner be hard! No husban' she kin git 'roun' heah's goner stand fer her actin' better'n him — an' I'd ruther see her lyin' daid befo' me dann turn out de way mos' paht-white gals does. Dey *soon* finds out how dey kin make de *bes'* money. De boys tells 'em!"

Trina shuddered. "Not Leah! If nobody else will, I'm going to do something about it — you wait'n' see. I may even send her off to school before Cousin Carietta takes her. Never let her come back to Sironia!"

"You's goodhearted, Miss Trina, but — " she sighed and kept at her sorting, " — you ain't practical!"

"Who's not practical?" Jed just back from the farm came clumping through the back door in farm riding clothes. He nodded to Mammy, smiled at the little Negroes, kissed Trina's cheek lightly, swept up Nelia and held her close. "How's Jed's sugar-plum?"

"Jed' sugar-pum!" Pudgy little arms squeezed tight around his neck and buried her nose in the front of his collar. "Hoss!"

Jed laughed aloud, the laugh Trina loved so much, the one never heard alone with her. "That's my girl! Learn young to like the smell of a horse. Pres-unt?" This was enough to start her wriggling upside down in his arms, white drawers' seat under his thrown-back chin, little hands plunging into brown corduroy pockets. Crowing triumphantly she pulled out a paper wad. Inside was her favorite, a "jaw-breaker" ball of hard candy covered with tiny, colored candy beads and fastened to a long strand of rubber which made it dance up and down when dropped, come back when thrown. As she struggled free to play with it, he demanded, "What you goner do first?" and got another hug. Before the Negro children could expire, each had one just like it.

"You's spawlin' ev'y last one of 'em plum rotten, Marse Jed." Mammy always said that.

"Sure, I am! If I don't, *you* will! Er—had a nice day, Trina?"

"Yes, Jed. Want to clean up before you eat your supper?"

"I ate at the farm with Tive Thompson."

"An' Miz Trina done fix you de *bes'* suppah—wid her own two han's!"

"I oughter sent word but—I just plain forgot."

"It's all right." Trina looked as if she had been stood in a corner before a whole class for something she hadn't done. He did not find her look unusual. It wasn't. "Was it—a good supper, Jed?"

"So-so."

"I hear tell Miz Thompson kin sho'—*cook* good!" Mammy put in loweringly. Jed stiffened, and Trina bit thin lips whiter than ever.

"Yes, Mammy." Jed looked directly at the old Negress. "The Tive Thompsons set a good table."

"Better'n our'n?"

"Oh, no, Mammy! Not *nearly* as good as 'our'n'!"

"You ain't goner git 'roun' me no sech way as dat!" An uncontrollable beam gave the direct lie to her words. "Besides, de boys dey say dat Mister Tive," the old Negress's distaste for the whole situation came out as usual in her pronunciation of the name, "Thompson, he ain't so much as a cotton-farmuh!"

"I've seen better," Jed admitted placatingly. "But I'm out there a good part of the time."

"You sho' is!"

"Mammy, quit reprimanding Jed like he was still fifteen years old—"

"Whinn he quits actin' lak he's fifteen, I'll quit reppermandin'."

Jed ducked as if avoiding a blow. "Cousin Nathalia gone to bed yet?"

"Before *you* come in? Mammy, you'd better get Nelia to bed and start on home with the others." Trina walked past Jed into the front hall. At the narrow stair she waited for him to walk with her. As usual he fell behind with exaggerated politeness. Tonight, for the first time, Trina hesitated. Maybe, it was that about Mrs. Tive Thompson made her do it. She didn't know.

"What're you waiting for, Trina?"

"For—for my husband to walk *with* me."

"Ten to one Cousin Carietta's been lecturing again on a husband's duties."

"No." She was trembling in every muscle with shame that was almost fear. She had her pride and to have to *beg* for a little—attention—

"You—*women!*" Jed stepped up beside her, and let her slide his arm around her waist, hold it there. At the top she let his arm slip away, thought its hand was going to linger where it had spanked her playfully—one time. It didn't. "Thank you, Jed."

"Glad to oblige—*any* time!" He was laughing at her, as he'd laugh at a child trying to be grown up. Seemed to think she never would. Fiercely she wished she could show him how grown-up she *was*. But that just wasn't in Trina Hadyn—yet.

He knocked on Cousin Nathalia's door. "Come!" He held it open for Trina.

"Sit down, children." Her silver pen stabbed a period onto an unnumbered (she had long ago lost count) page of her "Growing Up with Sironia" memoir, then looked up. "How did Jed like the lattice-top mince pie you made for him, Trina?"

"He—had already—had supper."

"Trina, you didn't tell me you'd done that!" Jed was always, no matter how frequently, genuinely surprised to learn he—of all people—had hurt someone. "I'd sure like some—right now!"

"Oh, would you?" Thin, girlish face came alive. "I'll go get you a slice—"

"Oh, no you won't. This is going to be done right. Look out!" With no inclination that way whatever he swung the astonished Trina up in his arms and headed down the stairs.

"Well!" from puckered old mouth tapped by silver pen-staff, "pity nobody thought of latticed mince pie *sooner!*"

It was early fall of 1902 before Marshall was reminded of Milly's vow to make "certain concessions to Calvin's wide friendship." She had sent for him "at tea time." That he might have a commitment which would interfere would not, of course, occur to her.

He postponed the one he did have, and was shown into the Thaxton front parlor by Josie at the time specified. Old Fred had "had a stroke," spent most of his time now bellowing orders to Young Fred in the stable. With no horses for more than a year now, there was still "The Show Case" to be kept shining under its cheesecloth dust cover.

Milly kept Marshall waiting an appropriate interval. This made him more aware of significant little changes. All of them cast light—a declining light. In the old days, all draperies here had been replaced every other season. The heavy blue ones, soon to be four years old, were still at tall doors and windows. That scuffed spot on cream and blue wallpaper to one side of the mantel would once have called for the room's being done over completely. It had been there now over a year. Everywhere were other small evidences of what the last twenty months had meant here.

Still others entered with Milly. These spoke more loudly. Her curling hair was whiter, her face smaller and even sweeter. Much of its old indomitable quality had softened, but it was far from gone. During Calvin's lifetime she had tended to grow a little heavy. Now she was thinning steadily. This became her, except at the throat.

Until steaming tea (not her old-time imported kind), homemade raisin-cookies and Josie had been disposed of, their talk was all tea-table, inconsequential. To himself, he smiled. He had postponed a meeting on finding "ways and means" of straightening the River above town. He had done so without regret—for this.

She replaced her cup and tiny napkin embroidered in pink larkspur on the dull mahogany tea wagon. "I want you to be first to know, Marshall." Neither then nor later was his opinion sought in the matter. But although she had decided what she would do, and there would be no change, she seemed to want him to tell her she was doing the right thing. Even had he disapproved strongly (which he did not), he admitted frankly to himself it would have done no earthly good to say so.

So advised in advance, he was not as surprised as most of Sironia was when there was the old-time sprinkling of the town with:

Mrs. Calvin Reardon Thaxton
Mr. Launcelot Reardon Thaxton
request the pleasure of

your presence
on
Thaxton Hill
Friday, November 28th, Nineteen Hundred and Two.
R.S.V.P.
8.30 P.M.

After "Well!" the second most frequent comment was probably "Bound for her!" Jed identified the slight soughing sound, as of a spring breeze in cottonwood treetops, which swept the town as that of many soft fingertips passing across the Old English lettering to verify its still being engraved. (Trina had quoted him to a discreet few—she was always quoting Jed, and sometimes when these quotations seemed to fall a little flat it was something more than just suspicion that Trina had edited them.) Some said it was "sweet of Miss Milly!" resuming her last Fridays. Others labeled it "outrage," without having consulted a dictionary in years. Miss Carietta decidedly *didn't* approve. A loyal widow should be a living memorial to her husband. But everyone would see how she'd stand by Millicent in this—also how she really felt about it. She even put herself out to the extent of taking complete charge of the decorations. She used woodland vines, all from Jed's farm, instead of "florist" smilax, borrowed tubs of bloomless oleanders instead of rented palms, and the paper roses from the attic. This time, she decided, the pink roses were appropriate. Knowing of the other's white evening gown and pink feather fan, Milly did not argue. As it happened, she had already decided to have the "pinks," had only murmured something about having the "yellows" to humor Carietta's habit of changing the plans of others.

There was all the old bustle of helping friends and frolicking Negroes. Three or four barely did the work of one. There was, however, a difference. Cousin Nathalia noticed it first. She certainly was not going to confide it to Carietta Cahoon (Miss Nathalia seldom attached the "Storrow"). Trina had come in the back parlor, told the slumped Gum on the folding ladder Mammy wanted him, and herself mounted it to get the vines rehung right. Almost instantly Miss Nathalia strode after her, trailing a long vine streamer, the same one she had been trailing for some time. She held the ladder with a touch which did not noticeably affect its unsteadiness on old carpet. "Trina, come down a step or two—"

"All right, honey." Trina resignedly hung a vine over a chandelier and came down. "What is it?"

"Trina," the old voice was a whispered croak, "have you noticed anything *unusual* about Millicent?"

"She seems a little—out of things. I mean her heart isn't in all

this — the way it used to be. That's to be expected, heaven knows! Everywhere she looks she sees something connected with Cousin Calvin — and I don't think she ever realized — while he was alive — how much he meant to her. It's always that way."

"Not always!" That said *some* wives were *too* fond of their husbands, especially of husbands who didn't care one way or the other about them. "There's — what you said, of course. What I meant is not so much — grief, as a sort of — consecration. Getting ready for this Friday without Calvin is literally killing her! And it's all so unnecessary. There's no need whatever for her to prove the Thaxtons are — what they are! Why, then? I — thought you might have figured it out — from the way she's looking — as if she moves in a — yes, in a kind of — *nimbus*. That's it exactly, as if in a kind of —"

"*I* haven't seen any nimbus-es, dear." Trina laughed softly. "But if I do, I'll tell *you* first. In the meantime, why not make a sonnet on it?"

Others noticed the same thing. None went into it quite so conscientiously. "It" was there when the guests began arriving, as their hostess headed the receiving line in what practically every woman guest recognized instantly as "her 1896 purple brocade with the gold beading removed and 1899's long, purple kid gloves and the 1900 aigrette." The pearl dog collar, of seven strands so often described in the *Sentinel* was conspicuous for the same reason so much of the vanished furniture was. "If Milly Thaxton thinks her throat doesn't need it any longer," Nanette Lane hissed at spiritless Stacey, "she's badly mistaken!"

Nanette was right. Milly felt all eyes at her throat, as she passed them along with "You know my son, Launcelot! Postmaster and Mrs. *Lane*, Launcelot!" The boy knew them, of course, Milly's smile added.

"Fish oughter be biting good," Mr. Lane, as usual, greeted Lance.

"That's just what I was saying — " As Lance spoke, the dark sculptured beauty of face and slim tallness dissolved in ill-at-ease vacuity and an almost doglike anxiety to please. It hurt Mister Lane, but gave Nanette a perverse thrill of pleasure. Better a worthless, no-'count daughter out of the way than an imbecile of a son on your hands for the rest of your life! If Lance were *hers*, he'd be up on top in Pyramus' room where he belonged, not put on exhibition for people to laugh at. (Although no one but Nanette would have thought of laughing.)

"Mister Lane!" Cousin Nathalia was a pronounced exclamation mark in midnight blue and the thickest-lensed "nose-glasses" in town. "Delighted to see you, I'm sure," it having been all of four hours since she had called by to tell him the mail delivery was "atrocious and

getting worse." "Carietta, don't let Mister Lane turn your head with his compliments — he flatters all us girls!" She tittered to prove the intimation that she and Carietta were the same age was intended humorously, although she was sure Carietta would know better. The old bean pole needs to be told she's been dead for years, Stacey Lane thought as he said, "But it *isn't* flattery — it's all *true*." He had certainly said the right thing. Dried up old winter apple! thought Miss Nathalia. Damn fool! Nanette's wide, thin lips bit out at him without sound, none being needed.

"My husband's usually right," Nanette spoke out, "and never more so than now. And isn't it fortunate," her squint eyes gave their snaky gleam everyone knew, "that Millicent, now that her mourning is *over*, has such a fine son to go about with."

"It is, *indeed!*" Miss Nathalia flushed. "And speaking of — offspring, do tell us the latest from *your* Laurine!"

Nanette was white with hatred which did not show in her arch smile, "Suppose you ask Stacey, my dear — if you *really* want to know!" She shoved that gentleman on down the line, nodding effusively to Miss Carietta but grasping Trina's pale hand with, "I *am* glad to see *you!*" Not that she was — who would be to see a slice of tripe? But Trina was the kind to say nice things to, and by doing so give backhanded slaps at some others. Even Jed, calling himself the "anchor man" of the receiving line, felt uneasy, not a laugh or joke in him and very little devilment.

"Je-ed! I see you so seldom these days. Why, you're not looking so badly. I *heard* — but then one can hear anything. Oh," turning back to the girl she had reached past to seize Jed's hand, Nanette cooed, "bye, bye — Trina!" Trina bowed and smiled just exactly as she would have bowed and smiled if the greeting had not been so intentionally belittling.

The music was the *most* noticeable difference. Always before it had been "the largest, the best and the most expensive." This "Friday" it consisted of two High School boys and their buxom lady teacher, Minnie Hightower, at the piano. It had been named "The Hightone Trio" that afternoon for the Society Page. Why they went through the harrowing procedure of tuning their instruments was never to be obvious in the results. No one could say they weren't working at it. At a baton-like drop of Miss Milly's black ostrich fan "Poet and Peasant" were *both* stopped dead in their tracks. With the pianist conducting by big-bottomed bounce on piano stool, the Trio went into one of Sousa's marches, *which* one being a matter of opinion.

The receiving line shifted into couples for the indispensable Grand March. Miss Milly led on Lance's arm. Trina and Jed were next. Miss Nathalia and Miss Carietta backed into the library and became

very busy over baskets of programs. Other couples, some fifty or more, fell in the line of march as it moved through double doorway into the front parlor. From there it wound into the back parlor, across the hall in front of the orchestra, into the dining room and then into the library where Miss Nathalia distributed programs to the gentlemen and Miss Carietta to the ladies. Another highlight of the evening to Nanette Lane was the programs were *printed!*

Sousa gave way to Strauss. The second violin (there was no "first") did very well indeed to have had only twelve lessons. Miss Milly gathered up a purple sheaf of the 1896 brocade, slipped Lance's right arm around her waist, took his left hand and began swaying him with the music. She had devoted much time and patience to trying to teach him to dance. He had tried, tried hard. "The truth of the matter is," she confided to Mrs. Balcom, in passing, "Lance is a beautiful dancer, but thinks it undignified! He won't dance with anyone but me, and *I* have to make him!" This last was true.

From the corner where they made their brave attempt, she was watching all the time, not her own friends but the youngsters, and not the boys—the *girls*. Little what's-her-name, the blonde child with the pug nose, always laughing, nearly always in white! One might overlook her father's having embezzled six thousand dollars from the Bank and having been saved from the pen only by Calvin's soft heart. That Junoesque creature with brown hair had family, respectability and some "material resources," but was *so* stupid. Where, *where* was there one really worthy of being—

Something unusual was happening at the front door. She let Lance's arm fall from her waist. A backwash of whispers rose over the tenuous thread of waltz music. Few were still dancing, all were watching, and pressing gradually toward the front.

"I came to see Mrs. Thaxton." That rasping, grating voice could be the voice of no one *else!* It addressed Marshall who off and on all evening had been looking apprehensively out the west windows toward the summerhouse. "Where *is* she?" Marshall was replying so low not a word of his could be caught. Now he had the woman in worn coat suit by the arm, trying to guide her into the library.

"Back over *there*, Hazel!" Nanette headed them off. "In the *back* parlor."

"Thank you, Nanette." Hazel shook off Marshall's hand to march down the hall and turn on the patched dancing canvas into the room where Milly had instinctively stepped in front of Lance.

"Marshall!" The command effectively halted him as he was about to seize a bony, brown-sleeved arm. "Mrs. Elliott is my guest."

"Yes, I am!" Scuffed little brown shoes were planted far apart, almost like a rooster's when crowing. "I got an invitation. That's why I've come: to *return* it. You considered your husband too good even

in death to associate with Bill Elliott!" She threw the invitation on wrinkled canvas with anger long in gathering. "That's what a common working woman, trying to pay off *her* honest debts, thinks of a Thaxton who can so soon afterward spend what little was left on a party for herself — isn't paying what *he* owed, much less what she's charged since. Engraved invitations! Plenty of the rest of you think so, too, but are too yellow-bellied to — "

"If that is all, Mrs. Elliott — ?"

"All?" In her fury, the little termagant had found confusion. How could she have expected the crowd to agree? Disappointed bewilderment was fleeting. The Bly came out full strength. "No — not quite all! I was fool enough once to keep Mrs. Temple from giving you what you had coming to you — and — " Before such a possibility could occur to anyone present, she had advanced two steps and brought the palm of one hand flat and violently against a Thaxton cheek, the force of the blow sending Milly back against Lance. "*I'll* deliver it now. If I'm wrong, hit me back!" She stood spraddle-legged, both hands behind her in front of Miss Milly. "Go on — hit me. It won't leave any stains on your fine white hands — "

"Marshall!" Only the name came from pale lips, bleeding slightly at one corner. "Do not *touch* her!"

"He won't if he knows what's good for him! And you — ?" She thought she had the advantage. "Can you deny anything I've said?"

"Have you — said all you have to say — *now?*"

"Yes — I have."

Conscious for the first time of the slight trickle at her lips, Miss Milly held her handkerchief to it and turned toward the hall. "Miss Hightower — Minnie! Will you please — continue?" Strauss began again almost immediately with only piano and violin, the drum having deserted for a better view than came through the oleanders. "Shall we resume — the dancing?" The rich voice swept the crowd. Almost as one, they danced away in step. She turned to Lance, petrified at what he had just seen. Somebody had said things like that — had struck Mo-other!

For a moment Miss Milly still faced by Hazel seemed not to know what was next. It was solved for her. Marshall took her hand. They danced off, past Hazel whose eyes held the uncertainty which had been Miss Milly's. Little face flushed. She spun on one heel. It twisted the canvas. Chin high over jerking throat, she stalked out the front door.

Where there should have been an excited buzz, there was none. It had been nipped cold by one look from Miss Milly, as she moved regally away with Marshall. She was leading — as usual.

If the tinny music and substitute decorations, the skimped refreshments and the made-over dresses had misted over the complete suc-

cess of the party, they did no longer. Suddenly nearly everyone was helping instead of holding back. All the young girls were pretending to want to dance with Lance instead of hiding from him. Everybody wanted to help.

Marshall hadn't been in his office more than half an hour the next morning when Hazel chop-chopped in without knocking. She wore the same brown suit and tight net collar of the night before. (He always thought she hadn't had them off all night. Certainly her eyes, narrow as charcoal smudges, so indicated.) She slammed the door behind her and herself into the chair he sprang to hold for her. "All right, Marshall Lipscomb! Say whatever you want to!"

"Tell me *first* — why — why you took that — of *all* ways, Hazel!"

"When that expensive invitation came, it flew all over me. Sent so folks would know the devoted widow was *sacrificing* herself by inviting her dear husband's *common* friends! Throwing away money they need to *live* on! It made me so mad I — all the madder, because I knew nobody else there would say a word." Here all attempt at self-justification faded. "Trina came by home — early this morning. She told me that Milly Thaxton pawned that hideous pearl collar so she could give the party that 'Calvin would want for Launcelot'! That it's to be the last until the one welcoming Launcelot's bride into the family! That's *one* set of invitations that'll never be sent! (Hazel was wrong about that, too, although for years it did not seem so.) "Marshall, did she — did she give it with the idea it'd help marry the poor thing off?"

"What Trina told you is true. It seemed the natural thing to do — to Milly. She could sell the old home, have enough for the two of them to live on in some comfort — but she'll *never* do it. Actually believes that if she holds on to Thaxton Hill just a little longer, Lance will marry fittingly and everything will be fine. She won't listen to me — on that subject. I'm going to keep trying. There's nothing reasonable in the position she's taken — but it is what turned last night's *wasteful* exhibition into something heartwarming and even — wonderful."

"Maybe, so — maybe, not! But, either way, when I've played the fool before, I've always had the gumption to admit it, if it killed me — which in this case it near-about has. I sent her word by Trina I wanted a chance to explain. She sent word back by Trina 'There is nothing which needs explanation' — meaning I'm the kind she'd expect to act that way and — "

"Hazel, you're talking louder and louder — "

"If I get much madder I'll — " She ran a loosening finger around inside the high-stayed net collar. "Marshall, the Lord knows I've no use for her kind, but will you tell her that it was all a misunderstanding — no, damn it, go the whole hog, and tell her I apologize?"

Marshall waited several hours for the confusion of "restoring" Thaxton Manor after the party to settle. He called just before suppertime, and had to wait. Miss Milly had planned to have a cup of tea with buttered toast in her room and had to dress.

Sironia had been stirred through every layer of its time-complicated social structure by Hazel's characteristically impulsive attack, and almost as much by her frank recanting. During the day she had "buttonholed" anybody who would listen. Fiery, funny — *human* little Hazel!

"An unexpected pleasure, Marshall." Miss Milly seemed to glide in without need of walking. Simple black wool, white jabot and cuff ruching were as impressive as — Marshall groped for a comparison — as ermine and velvet would have been on anyone else. "You don't have to tell me you got no sleep last night — you look even 'worse for wear' than I do."

"I don't doubt it, Milly." Both still stood — expectantly. She must be filled with curiosity about his visit, but she would never ask. "Hazel dropped by my office today — "

"Hazel *who?*"

"Milly! She really feels *bad* about — last night. She's been chasing people all day to admit — "

"So I — believe I heard. Trina, poor child, has been quite busy in the matter, rushing back and — "

"Milly Thaxton, listen to me!" His change in tone toppled much of imperial dignity into open-lipped surprise. "Hazel behaved abominably — " His use of such a word almost stopped him, " — but she thought at the time, you were wasting Lance's money on a party for yourself. Wait a minute — she knows better now. She wants to apologize without any of the usual reservations. She really didn't know at the time that — "

"Did your friend for whom you plead so — earnestly ever 'really' know *anything?* You may tell her for me, Marshall Lipscomb, that her conduct last night — or any time — is her affair — *not* mine! That it doesn't matter to me in the least, since I can make allowances for such as — " She stopped, as if in the middle of a prepared statement which has been written by someone else with whom she found she no longer agreed. "No, that sounds too much like — *me*, doesn't it? Tell her I accept her apology — that it was my fault really — that I — oh, Marshall, there's enough hard feeling in the world. Tell her anything you like that'll make her feel better, anything so long as I don't have to see the little — !" She had stopped short of the epithet. Marshall felt he was entitled to hear her say it, felt somehow cheated — but warmed, uplifted, too.

CHAPTER 13

WELL OUT an upstairs west window of *The Sironia Sentinel*, a pair of long, narrow, high-button shoes were serving as a forward gun sight for pale, white-lashed eyes. Straight and unobstructed was their line of vision to the Court House roof, bright—where it wasn't rusted. "That, as you'll never learn, Sironia, O Sironia, is how a newspaper should operate, with vision straight and *unobstructed!*" Caleb Hone spoke distinctly, but softly. Such words must reach no human listener, least of all Wolfgang, most sullen and sly of limitless Janke progeny.

This was a completely immune method, Caleb had found, of letting-off-steam. Even better, time permitting, was that of actually setting down in black graphite on yellow paper what he could never print. It was a sort of Fourth Estate Confessional. And it worked. Sometimes even before he'd finished getting them down, all rebellious fulminations were gone. Wadding scrawled paper and flipping it into the limbo of wastebasket helped just that much more.

Already it was a little difficult to recall what had brought on today's rebellion. It had been only partly the most recently received batch of word-crammed sheets from Miss Nathalia — the fortieth installment, it said. Unhampered by the demands of punctuation, syntax or coherence, her "maunderings" (as she sometimes termed them) leapt freely back and forth across the years. If Caleb altered so much as a splintered infinitive, he would have no worries about how to fill in the rest of the day after issue. At such times Miss Nathalia phoned all members of her family, opening each conversation, Jed had told him, with "And what — do you suppose — he's done *now*?" Nathalia Victress! Caleb was through, finished, whipped down and disgusted. If she sent her installments in dog-latin, that's the way they'd be printed, rather than face that face in one of its moments of hurt — or *any* time. Now he'd pass on to another prong of his thorny editorial crown.

There was, for instance, the near-idolatry in which the town with few exceptions enshrined Calvin Thaxton's widow. It was all right, Caleb mused, as he loosened the crotch-bind of much-washed, much-shrunk cream-colored trousers, to uphold ideals by treating poverty as an uninvited, hence unrecognized, house guest. But poverty was bound to know it was as unwelcome on Thaxton Hill as — Hazel Elliott, and almost as hard to ignore.

Where Caleb came from, a widow left financially as Miss Milly had been would have sold the home for what it would bring. She would have invested the cash, got herself "genteel" work paying practically nothing, budgeted what income she had, and lived within it — even "put by" something. If Calvin's widow had done that (and it was foolish to say she couldn't have found "honest" work, even in *this* raveling-at-the-edges civilization), she wouldn't be barely existing on surreptitious sales of heirlooms now. But she would feel and others here would feel that she had somehow along with her services bartered her ladyship. Relatives little better off than she would have still visited her, still invited her to their homes, of course, but she would have their sympathy, *not* as was now the case their admiration — and love. To Yankee Caleb, the strangest part was that unlike most impoverished aristocrats, Miss Milly incurred few debts. She paid those she owed as promptly as she could. Her tax money was the first to come in after January 1 — possibly, because she was so wrapped up in that boy, so blind to his incompleteness that she felt saving the home for him came ahead of all else. A "day of reck'nin'," as the Negro spirituals had it, was bound to come, a day when all the towering structure she had built up on the wobbly foundation that was Lance would totter so visibly even she must see. Tragic it was, but like much tragedy there was a funny side, too. Everyone said some-

body *else* ought to tell her "the truth about Lance"; and, more particularly, some of the things he was *doing*. Nanette Lane was the only one in town mean enough. Mercifully, perhaps, a stroke had put her in bed and kept her from writing any more cruel anonymous letters which had been all but traced directly to her.

There was a meaty character for "Growing Up with Sironia" as well as one Miss Nathalia would never mention. Well, Nanette Lane was certainly paying for her sins, condemned to bed and dependence on a man she hated second only to her vanished daughter. No guessing was necessary. The neighbors for two houses on both sides and across both Aurelia Streets and Fifth Street couldn't help but hear her — not that they put much effort behind their not-trying to. However, they did wish Stacey Lane would someday actually use that trunk strap he threatened to. But he never would.

Was it, all this that had happened to the Lanes (considered a reasonably happy family when Caleb had first come to Sironia), to be taken as retribution? A lot of good it would do a fellow to try to reason that out. Better, as Caleb usually did, stay on a subject only so long as it interested him, and quit when it began making him doubtful. This one now had.

There — swaggering confidently from beyond the Court House — was a little figure guaranteed to put Nanette Lane out of his mind. Must be about twlve years old now. Tam's shrill, nowhere-near-on-key whistling came faintly. It touched something inside Caleb that wasn't often touched. Why wasn't the boy at work? For the last three summers, Marshall had been having him at the store. Oh, yes, *now* he remembered. Marshall had wanted the boy to work all day, but Moira, for a wonder, had put her foot down flat. "Half-day" was enough. Good thing, too. Not a good idea to hold all-boy Tam down too much or too soon. Tam was a member of Caleb's Sunday School class in the Sironia Baptist Church. (The *First* Baptist was still down near the River where it was before earlier Lipscombs and so on had "seceded"). Last Sunday's "lesson" had included the story of Salome, *et al.* (For kids that age! But it wasn't Caleb's place to say why.) He had asked Tam the subject. The tight-breeched little imp had answered, "The Beheading of Happy Hooligan," and been rewarded with a deluge of appreciative sniggers. Caleb had had difficulty keeping his sour-lined visage stern and disapproving. It had got back to Moira who although she could never be a real Baptist, herself, was trying to make Tam one. She had phoned Caleb. He had told her no apology was necessary. He would have liked to tell her this was just one of the things he liked most about her boy. Miss Carietta's Charles, now, was an upstanding enough little fellow, but with not a speck of either humor or devilment in him.

A long abandoned kind of thinking stirred behind high pale forehead. Such thoughts as these once uppermost there now only "came and went" — and infrequently. Caleb was again for the moment the novelist he had once thought himself, *had* to trace to its source the extraordinary metaphor come to delight him. Let's see now —

He had been reviewing the unenviable predicament of poor Stacey Lane. Tam had come into view on the Square. That — by contrast of the two boys' origins — had suggested the family-ridden Charles. Then — magically — what he had been looking at without seeing them had shot into sharp relief — two trees. The two nearest the *Sentinel's* corner of the Square, they dimmed all else. Nobody knew the age of one of them, great, slick-leaved, thick with white, lemon-pungent blossoms from widespread branches scraping the ground when the wind blew to swaying tip forty feet above. But there must be hundreds of people around here who could remember the Hill Family "to-do" over letting the self-seeded hackberry grow where it had sprung up. Now it was topping the other. Left alone its kind, as was said often, could "take a town" with annual reinforcement of thousands of seedlings. But the other was far more beautiful, far more enduring, too, and — Yes, just as hackberries could take a town so could the Lipscombs and their kind and — Now the analogy was no longer entirely satisfactory. It was too — obvious. Must have occurred to thousands before it had to him. But — obvious or not it still pleased him, and that typical little Lipscomb hackberry over yonder showed in his self-importance and confident little walk already how plainly he was a living part of what was and would be increasingly his own.

Coming this way, he was carrying a plate with a napkin over it. It was a good guess the pretty, sad-eyed Moira was sending something to cheer up lackluster, always striving Trina Haydn. Had any town ever had more wives who loved husbands to whom they mattered not at all? Moira Lipscomb had this stocky, almost redheaded little rascal to love her, but poor Trina Haydn had, so far, lost everyone she'd got started — three in a row. She didn't deserve this — on top of all else she had to put up with.

With distaste Caleb pushed the "Growing Up" maunderings a little farther away. Why couldn't *she* have one of Nanette's strokes? Just in her writing arm, of course. Certainly, the *Sentinel* would never dare discontinue running her memoirs. They cost nothing and did fill up space, but their praise of an obsolete super-race reigning over the mythical kingdom of Sironia never varied. According to Miss Nathalia's writings, none of its members had ever lied or stolen or fornicated or murdered — or for that matter, gone to the privy. Everybody knew what the elongated authoress really thought of a *certain* human mixture of moonlight and honeysuckle *and* granite. But from

every mention of her in these memoirs, a reader who didn't know would be sure Miss Nathalia considered Carietta Storrow the essence of an "Old South" which had come into existence only after it was dead.

Strangely enough, people like Oscar Rogan were, secretly, just as proud of all the old dream world. They would go to almost any length to intimate that somewhere back yonder a great-aunt had been "of the blood"! The Hill Family Negroes almost without exception considered Oscar Rogan and his kind poor white trash; and Caleb Hone as a "carpetbagger"! — in a town where there hadn't been a genuine carpetbagger for almost thirty years. Would anything ever change the thought in this bend of a river which had a name, but was never called anything but The River, since no other river anywhere "signified." Nor any other war! Caleb had thought the Spanish-American one might — but it was hardly felt beyond the self-awarded commissions and the drilling over beyond Reardon's Pasture by Calvin and Jed. Miss Carietta had even told — not asked — Caleb, "not to overemphasize this Cuban disturbance. It only confuses the children in their study of THE WAR."

Bound for old Carietta! (Referring to her with such disrespect was one of his luxuries of thought.) He could smile now about the time she had summoned him to Storrow Hill. Six years ago, that was. He could have declined — but he could also have quit his job, and left town, but he had "appeared." It had been the summer after the Lane girl had figuratively (and some said literally, as her train pulled out) thumbed her nose at all Sironia stood for. Miss Carietta had been seated on a rattan settee on the shady end of the great Storrow veranda. She wore "my gray silk" and a small hat of high gray wings on the bronze hair. That was meant to show him she was leaving as soon as he could be got rid of politely. Every time she rocked back white blossoms shattered about her.

"Mister Hone." She placed him in another rattan rocker with a just perceptible inclination of the gray wings. "Sironia was founded by the great-grandfather of *both* my late husband and myself, as even you must know. Mister Hone, may I ask if it is your intention to print the rumor about — the Lane girl's — er — latest difficulty?"

"It's no rumor, Mrs. Storrow. It's from the Atlanta police record."

"That — is beside the point! What that girl has done — or is alleged to have done by a strange police force — is her affair. It must not be used to — er — open old wounds — "

"It's news. That's what comes first."

"With *some*, you mean. I shouldn't have to tell you, Mister Hone, that there is news — *and* news. One can be printed with dignity — the other, not. For example — "

While she was "for example-ing" with a listing of the three most mouth-watering local stories of the last year, none of which the *Sentinel* had been allowed to mention, he did not have to listen, could ponder: Just why is she buckling on Excalibur about this? Is she afraid Jed'll read the paper, get stewed to the gills and light out for Atlanta — or is she protecting the Lanes? The girl herself?

"— so, you see, there's really no alternative. There must be no compromise with good taste."

"I — I can't say that I do — see, I mean. It's already all over town. I didn't want to mention this — the *Sentinel* has a note that her family has no objection to our printing it — signed by Mrs. Lane." He rose stifly, fingering the greenish-black, grosgrain hatband almost off the yellowed panama. "If we don't print the news, we might as well not — "

"Mister Hone!" she raised her eyes slowly, "*I won't have it!* I want your word that that — canard about poor Laurine Lane will not be printed."

So — it had come. She had made no direct threat of what she'd do — didn't need to. Kill the best story of the month or go down in a deluge of phone calls, irate visits, canceled subscriptions and withdrawn advertising. "You've lived here longer than I have, Mrs. Storrow — and, as I have before, I bow to your judgment."

"Thank you, Mister Hone." There was no show of triumph, everything — in the best of taste. Nothing remained now but to leave without showing too plainly he'd been dismissed. In this he received assistance.

"Mother, Leah and I want to — "

"Char-r-rles, dear!" Her change from imperialism could not have been more complete. "We have company, Charles!"

"How-dy do!" Automatically a little white hand stuck out. As fair and delicate as his mother, there was the underneath sturdiness their much vaunted breeding often gave. "Mother, Leah and I want Grandfather Leonidas' sword to play Gettysburg."

The *Sentinel* killed the Lane story. Nanette was furious with him. Hazel Elliott had been his only real help. For all her freaky outbursts at times, *there* was a woman who had a big heart *and* a sound head. "Don't let 'our betters' get your goat, Friend Hone," she had consoled, right in the middle of Main Street while wagons and carriages missed them by inches. "I'm glad you killed that story. Just you mark my words. That girl's hit bottom, but before she's through, she'll show this town."

"You admire — her, don't you?"

Following a quirky little smile of a thousand wrinkles came "I do! Moira Lipscomb wrote Laurine once and asked her to let us know

how we could help. We know she got it, because it didn't come back, and each of us got an unsigned postcard — I've got mine here — " She rummaged in a gathered green reticule ornamented with canta-loupe seed, and extended to Caleb a rankly colored picture of a red brick bank in Atlanta. Across the very blue sky above it was written neatly, "This isn't mine — yet!" It wasn't even signed. "Moira's card was every bit as spunky as — "

Caleb pulled her to one side, out of the way of a chugging EMF touring car. "Glad you approve of the *Sentinel's* censorship!" Another grin and they went their ways. Speaking of approval, he approved of — Hazel.

The beak-nosed little dynamo had surmounted the descent from "Elliott's Hotel" to a very minor "position" with complete success. She had enough to live cheaply but in fair comfort. She made no pretenses at anything else. Miss Carietta did nearly all her own cleaning, but did it at *night* so the neighbors could not see. Miss Milly, on the other hand, could be seen with a cloth tied around her hair, almost all white now, and her skirt looped up over spotless white petticoat, washing door lights, polishing waxed porches — all the things four or five house servants once did.

It was moving to see Lance try to help. It took more time for Miss Milly to show him how than it did to do it herself — except for cutting the grass. Into that Lance could really throw himself, heart, soul and mower. There were mothers in Sironia who actually envied Miss Milly in a way, for *she* would always have her boy depending on her, not growing up and farther and farther away, "forever" finding fault with what she did, and then putting her in second, or third, place when some hippy young hussy came along and stirred depths mothers do not. It was beautiful to see the two Thaxtons of a summer's evening, sitting on their Hill's great veranda. At dusk the changes did not show. Rocking and talking, they seemed completely happy, probably were.

Old eyes focused again on Tam almost to the *Sentinel's* side of the Square. In flushed face, round and good-natured under tight brown cap, there was nothing of the fine Thaxton chiseling, nothing of its sensitiveness. The two boys (about the same age) would go in widely different directions — that is, if Sironia let them. The one had inherited refinement and looks — even beauty! — practically no money and a mother to be reckoned with. The other was as plain — and sweaty — as small boys usually are. "Common as pig tracks" he might be, but with the money Marshall Lipscomb had made and the commonsense of Moira — well, Tam Lipscomb might someday own the whole damn town. The day was coming when what Tam had inherited would even in Sironia mean more than countless grandfathers too good to scramble for money.

Wonder if the boy was coming up here with another of those squibs for "Traveling Sironians." It was pathetic even to a news-weary, name-in-the-paper-surfeited editor, the way naïve Moira tried to cover up those trips of Marshall's:

> "Marshall Lipscomb, owner and general manager of Lipscomb's Emporium, is away for a hurried buying trip. Mrs. Lipscomb did not accompany him on this tour owing to young Tam's being in school."

or:

> "Just back from completing a business deal in New Orleans, Marshall Lipscomb states that his opening next week will feature the most dazzling array of fine women's ready-to-wear he has ever offered." (This one Caleb, with true small-town editorial license, had printed with the addition, "Not after free advertising, are you, Marshall????)

Another such contribution by Moira had concluded:

> Mrs. Lipscomb and Tam had planned to accompany him as usual [they never had] but were prevented by the latter's slight case of the la grippe from which he has now fully recovered."

There hadn't been any "the la grippe," Caleb knew.

Yep, he'd guessed right. Tam's labored climb was on the worn wooden steps. Moira often sent "some goodies" along with whatever bit of "news" she wanted in the paper. Wonder what this "personal" would be about? Marshall wasn't away, had said only this morning he didn't plan to be any time soon.

Careful pause was at the door. Tam was obviously trying to decide how to knock when both hands were on the plate and he had been told not to set it down and not to kick the door. Well, he'd have *harder* problems. Some would be provided, Caleb decided, by grow-up as a Lipscomb in *this* town. Better let him figure out the door-knocking.

A sharp rattle was the answer. Wolfgang opened the door, showed round little face well pleased. The rattling had been caused by twisting his tight britches so that the big, dull-bladed pocketknife chained to his belt would swing and hit the door. The boy would manage all right.

The origin of Moira's current news item which was to puzzle Caleb Hone momentarily lay in the night before.

After an early supper, Tam was helping with the dishes while his father puffed at "my meerschaum" out on the front porch. An hour of duck-on-a-rock with Jared and four white boys had been ended by Moira's call. She didn't want her boy on the streets — especially River Road or even Second Street after dark. He had come in protesting, knowing it would do no good, once she had said, "*You* come here!"

Marshall moved inside against increasing darkness to sit in the corner by the big yellow-globed lamp. Electricity was yet a few years from this part of town. Remarkably young looking for forty-seven, his hair was so black each white hair stood out. His shirt, white as only Moira could wash it, was open at the throat. Still smooth-shaven, the reddish pigmentation of his skin gave his face a youthful flush. Something — perhaps vanity — had kept his body slim. Moira had long known all that marrying a handsome man brings his wife. So long as he kept his looks, other women would be after him. Maybe she should be glad it was one like the notorious Patsy Garrick rather than somebody he might consider marrying — Miss Milly, for instance. A lot of people had taken up Nanette Lane's malicious "Wonder how long it'll take Marshall to get Moira out of his way — now that *she's* a widow." Moira had faced him with it. It was shame over the Garrick mess that had made him for once want to discuss Miss Milly with her. "Moira," he had said, "Milly Thaxton and I have never mentioned the years of our youth since she married Calvin — and we never will. She married the right one and won't ever marry any other."

"Did — did *you* marry the right one?"

"Time alone can tell, my dear!" was all he had said.

Her husband was far from the settling-down stage Tam's birth, it had seemed for five years, had brought. If it hadn't been "this Garrick thing," it would have been someone else. It was flattering, Moira supposed, that her rival was so pretty. She had seen her, and taken her in thoroughly. She'd made several visits to Sironia, when Marshall had been too busy to get to New Orleans. She had stayed at the cabin up on Reardon's Bluff with no one supposed to know. Half the town did, including Moira. Of the first visit, Nanette had breathlessly sent word.

Moira had left Tam with Josie at Mammy's, and used Marshall's flat-bottomed fishing boat to cross the River. It was not the first time she had climbed "the short cut" up Reardon's Bluff. Nor was it the first time she had indulged "her failing" through the low windows of the Lipscomb cabin. Patsy *was* beautiful! Getting flabbier about the chin, hips and bosom, she would yet be able to devil honest women for years to come. Moira knew better than to confront them, start a

row. That might be the one thing that would lose her Marshall altogether. She had watched the two of them in the cabin as long as she could, was just barely able to force herself back down the winding cliff path. Hardest of all had been pretending she knew nothing.

She glanced now from Marshall studying a mail-order catalogue (for such competition's ideas) to Tam, sprawled on his stomach at their feet and midway *The Wizard of Oz* for the fourth time. The lamplight made his hair more red than brown. She hated for it to darken.

Now the dishes were done. She loved the almost nightly mending of knee britches. They still held the curve of firm little behind and smelled strongly of the day's ceaseless sweaty activities. It was a good thing his pa was in the clothing business, she told everybody. She took up her work basket, began the search for the right needle, the right thimble, the right thread.

"How big's a em'ral', Mama?"

"*An* em*erald*, son."

"*An* em-er-al*d*." Tam repeated after Marshall, but still looked to Moira.

"They's different sizes, some big's my thumb, ain't they, Mister Lipscomb?"

"Uh-huh." With one foot he patted tight breeches.

"But in the Emerald City they was—"

"Were! That's a *fairy* tale, Tam—"

"I know, Pop—but they could use the right size emeralds, couldn't—"

"Some folks like their books to be different from the way things really are, son." That was aimed at Moira's beloved *St. Elmo*.

She bit her full lips together. What happiness a woman had in this world came more from what she didn't say than from what she did. Not another wife in Sironia had learned that.

"Wisht I had a—*an* emerald city!" Tam couldn't concentrate on his reading long without wanting to take some of it out in action. He wasn't allowed outside—except to the privy—so late, and he'd already used that excuse once. He rolled over on his back, and began running upside down. "I'm on my way to the Emerald City! Now I'm passing the Munchkin Country and—"

There was a scratching tap on the back-door jamb of the general-purpose room and a dark, low shadow in the opening. Moira laid down Tam's dirty britches, stuck her needle upright in them. "Why, hello, Fred. Didn't know you were spry enough to be running around at night."

"Evenin', Miz Maw-ruh, Mistuh Lipscomb an' Tam. I ain't! But Miz Milly didn' have nobody else to sen'." He tried to hide his pleas-

ure at being needed. "Now dat dat Josie don't stay on de place no mo' — done built herse'f a house of her own. Kain't wait ter git thoo whin she do come!"

"How'd Mammy like her moving out — now that Lilybeth's run off again and left her all those babies to look after?"

"Anything dat Lilybeth do is all right wid Mammy Henderson. Dat li'l Luella she do near'bout all de wuk aroun' dat place. Lilybeth didn't never turn a han', nohow. She's de no-'countest gal evuh I —"

"You — said Miss Milly sent you?"

"She sho' did! She done sont me wid a note — dis heah un'!" He extended in palsied gray-black hand an old envelope of slick note paper, its perfume sunk to mustiness. It was addressed in yellowish-blue ink and the almost indecipherable, if fashionable, script of the early eighties to "Mr. and Mrs. Marshall V. Lipscomb and Tam."

Moira took it, "Thank you, Fred. Sit down on the stoop there and rest your bones a while."

"No, thankee, ma'am. If I sets in de night air, I stiffens. Bettuh be movin' while I kin. Hopes y'all kin come — "

"Thank you, Fred." Marshall spoke for the first time and knowing no more than the rest of them did, added, "Tell Miss Milly we'll be proud to!"

When the old Negro had moved down the garden path and out the back gate to River Road, Moira said, "Now that Fred's read it and you've accepted — " She tore it open.

"Let me have it, Moira." He held out a hand. Without delay or sound she surrendered the envelope. He opened the folder of note paper almost reverently and read it slowly. Then he folded it, replaced it in the envelope and slipped it in the pocket of his white shirt. He was about to take up the catalogue again when Tam could hold in no longer.

"What's it say, Pop — what's it *to?*"

Pleasure rippled the florid, reminiscing face. "Miss Milly wants us to bring you to tea at four o'clock Sunday — that's day after tomorrow. Will you be able to go, Moira, do you think?"

"Sunday afternoon?" She would carry out the little deception for Tammy's sake. "No, not Sunday, I'm afraid. I promised — Trina —" She didn't say what. "Looks like I won't ever get inside Thaxtons' until — Mister Lance's engagement is announced. I'm *sure* going then — " That was one of the town's standing jokes.

"I ain't never bin up there!" Tam was squatting like a toad between them. "Is *he* goner be there?"

"S-sh, Tammy!" Moira looked at Marshall. Both understood perfectly who "the boy" meant.

But how straighten a twelve-year-old out on such a thing as "The

Reardon Mark," when they were none too clear on it themselves. There was already so much Negro and other gossipy exaggeration. Marshall would try: Tam must know that Mister Lance was a fine fellow. Yes, he certainly did like to walk and walk, all around town. Nothing made Mister Lance as happy as being able to help somebody. He carried bundles for the women: helped kids mow their lawns. Mister Lance following a whirring lawnmower looked like a music teacher listening to the prettiest piece ever played. More than once he'd put his shoulder to a wheel to get a wagon out of one of Sironia's many mud holes. Somehow he enjoyed helping out where there wasn't ever any chance of getting anything for himself in return. "That *proves* he's crazy!" Oscar Rogan had said.

"Splice says he's like Lopin' Jesus."

"No, Tam, no!" Marshall hastened to get in. Loping Jesus was the town idiot of uncertain age and origin named for his humping, aimless striding. His slobbering and tricky eyes like a snake's turned his constant grin into something nobody wanted to look at. No, Mister Lance wasn't like that. Every time Tam had seen him, he had been neatly dressed — with a frock coat and a high silk hat. More than once Mama had said that Mister Lance had been born without some things he was entitled to, but he'd been born with some things most folks would do well to copy.

Pop must have thought Tam wasn't listening just because he kept turning the *Oz* pages. "Come here." He flopped the thick catalogue on the table in lamplight bright on the slick red cover, and drew Tam between spread knees so that there were only a few inches between their two heads.

"Son," his whisper was gruff, "of all the things we have to learn, one of the hardest is to feel the right way about them not as lucky — as well off as we are. *Talk* about feeling sorry for them comes cheap. Everybody does that. More often than not he wants only to show how kindhearted *he* is. Nobody really likes a fellow like — say, Lopin' Jesus — but don't *you* ever make fun of him!" The brown-red head ducked guiltily. "It's not *his* fault that Lance's that way — "

"Whose fault is it?"

"Now, Moira!" Marshall recognized the toss of her head which said it was God's punishment for something his folks had done. "Nobody knows — for sure, son. When you meet him, you can, at least, not make things any harder."

"Let's ask him to come live with us."

"Gracious, Tam!"

"I — I doubt he'd like that, son — even if your mother would. That's another thing to remember: what we think other people ought to like they usually don't. Nobody would dare tell *his* mother they

feel sorry for him. But to me, he's the — pitifullest man in all Rear-
don County. Tammy, if he'd been born, say, fifty years before he was
— and — *at* hisself, he'd've been right at the top of the heap." The
big hands, their sleek hairs splinters of light, took shoulders on both
sides of puzzled young face. "When you and me go to see Miss Milly
on Sunday, he'll be there all right. He won't be any Wild Man of
Borneo, like you expect, nor any circus clown. When you look at him,
think of what I just told you, feel sorry for him, but don't let them
know you do. Can you do that — for Pop?"

"Sure!"

"Dont' be *too* sure. Just try — that's all Pop asks." He let him go,
and Tam lay back down, but not to read. Marshall caught Moira's
eyes and nodded downward: their son was thinking.

Moira nodded, too, absently. Shaking out the mended trousers, she
took them into the bedroom, and lit the small lamp on the dresser.
Standing bent beside it, with her own stub of pencil, she began writing
on a piece of wrapping paper. A moment later she scratched out all
she had written. She started over, then consulted yesterday's *Sentinel*.
Once more she wrote.

A half-hour or more passed. Tammy had called twice to know what
she was doing. At last she was satisfied, was copying the final result
on a piece of blue-ruled paper from Tam's composition book:

> "Among those dropping in for tea on Thaxton Hill this Sunday will be Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Lipscomb and Master Tammas Lipscomb."

Of course, she wasn't going, but Sironia was going to know she'd
been invited. And seeing her name like this in the paper was like
going — a little. She'd send it over by Tam in the morning with some
cold watermelon for Mister Hone and whichever of the Jankes were
helping him now.

A full hour before time to leave for Miss Milly's that hot July Sun-
day, Marshall was ready. He was idling up and down their narrow
front porch, a matter of inches off the ground. He was in his shirt
sleeves.

Inside, Tam quite able to get himself ready made out he couldn't.
Mama liked to do it. And it let him think about some things he'd
rather be doing — like swimming with Jared and the rest of "The
Panthers." "My *goodness!* What's him frowning so about?"

"Nothing!" Round, little face cleared instantly. It wouldn't do any

good to tell Mama he was worried about what had been done to Loping Jesus yesterday down along the River. He didn't know, himself, just how it had happened, but the six Panthers had run across him, and he'd sniggered something nasty like he always did to please them. Splice Rogan, oldest of the six, had answered something nasty, too. Loping had started unbuttoning his pants and Splice had said, "We'll fix *you!*"

Tam didn't remember all, but it didn't last long, and they'd left Lopin' naked and crying for his clothes that they'd flung up in tops of different River willows. It wasn't until then Tam had remembered his promise to feel sorry for Loping.

"Worse than a angleworm! Quit wriggling a *minute,* can't you? How you expect me to get your shirttail in all around? And you needn't be puffing out your chest like a pouter pigeon, neither. Your pop's only taking you along for the looks of things."

"What's 'looks of things'?" And when she looked at him and waited, he added, "Please, ma'am?"

"That's better. It's — well, when a widder wants to see a man that ain't hers, she don't want people to — think things. So-o, she has somebody else come along to show it's just a sociable call!" All the time she kept trying to plaster down brownish-red spikes, seemed bent on scrubbing off some of his millions of dim freckles.

"I don't see why-y!"

"Nobody *else!* Remember, Tam Lipscomb, everything I told you — 'Yes, ma'am,' or 'No, ma'am,' or 'Thankee, ma'am.' She's asked Pop what kind of cake you like best. Only *one* piece, remember!"

"Even if it's spice cake — ma'am?"

"Yes. But she might give you some to bring home. If she don't, Mama'll make you some — and better too. And, mind you, Tam, above all, don't go getting one of them tickled spells of yours. I was never — never so — hoo-miliated in my whole life as I was when Brother Proone called last week and you got to laughing at the drop dangling on the end of his long nose and had to be sent to weed the garden!"

"You laughed, too."

"Not while he was here!" This was what came of Marshall's making Tam a Baptist instead of what he was meant to be. He wouldn't have been finding anything to laugh at in Father Clarren now. "Remember about Mister Lance, remember he can't help being like he is. Be nice to him — he'll act just about as old as you do — "

"But what *makes* him that way?"

"For the ten millionth time, I don't know. And your smart daddy don't know either. They's four or five thousand folks in Sironia now, and there's just about that many i-dees about how Lance Thaxton

come to be the way he is. Miss Carietta says he was took with instruments, and later dropped on his head when a baby, but she's just trying to cover up. It's the Lord's own way of dealing with families too good to marry anybody but their own cousins. And Mister Lance ain't near as bad off as his great-uncle was — the one that many a one still say they see running round of nights, like a ape — "

"Moira!" Pop had come in silently, "Don't you think you have pumped enough of that into your son for one day?"

"He keeps on asking," sullenly.

"Naturally. Tam, Pyramus Thaxton has been dead for sixty years or more — and the dead stay dead. Don't let me hear you *or* your mother talking ghosts again. It's time to go, anyway."

He slipped into the coat which for all its black thinness would have his clean white shirt wringing wet with sweat by the time they'd driven to Thaxton Hill. His stiff-brimmed straw hat had a "blazer" band of blue, red and yellow. It made him look younger, and he knew it. He'd been told so a great many times — mostly in New Orleans.

Moira snapped on Tam's dark blue bow, already tied. It matched his blue wash pants. "There ain't any coat to these pants, Marshall."

"He's lucky!" Himself, he slapped a straw sailor hat on Tam's spikes of hair again rising and took his hand. Tam twisted it loose. Marshall smiled. "Ex-cuse *me!* Come on." Mama grabbed Tam for a last whisper, as he had known she would. No, he wouldn't forget. Yes, he'd remember everything to tell Mama.

Side by side they walked out to the buggy which Mama had hitched Old Blue to. Tam took the reins and Pop got in alongside while she ran to open the back gate. She was still waving when they drove around the corner onto Reardon.

It was Sunday, all right. There were a few lost-looking people ambling along heat-wavy Main just waiting for the day to be over. He wanted to see inside Thaxton Manor, but he wanted to be with the Panthers, too. He had acted real important when he'd told them about his invitation. They'd probably seen it in the Sunday *Sentinel* about the same time Pop had and exploded, "Of all things to put in the paper!"

Had Old Blue read the paper, too? Without any pull on the right line, she turned up into the crescent drive, and settled to a walk on thin-worn gravel rising between crape myrtles. Pop said they had once been thick and heavy with deep crimson blooms in the summer. Now they were tall and scraggly and as sick-looking as the dead grass which covered most of the slope. Mister Lance never seemed to get it all mowed at the same time. Mama said they couldn't afford the water to keep it green. The big house needed paint bad. She had said

that, too, and she was right. The four great big columns showed gray wood where crackled paint flakes had blown off. The walls of the house were the faded pink of old, old brick, not near as pretty, close to, as Tam had expected.

Miss Milly, herself, answered Tam's tiptoed thumping of the black iron hand holding a black iron ball. "Come in — gentlemen!" She took Tam's hand first, as if he were a grown man. He liked Miss Milly. He liked her stiff-starched whiteness, liked the black-on-gold brooch with tiny gold tassels dangling; "How are you, Tammas?"

"Po'ly, ma'am."

"Tam!" Pop was laughing harder than he'd seen him since Miss Carietta showed the lavender sachet bags on her garters when her skirt got caught on her carriage wheel in front of the Resurrection Baptist Church. "Milly, he's heard the niggers say that so often when they have on their company manners, he thinks it's 'high-toned.' *How* are you, son!"

"Fine!"

"I'm so glad, dear — " She preceded them into the dim blind-closed front parlor. It was almost cool here. Tam's eyes went ahead of her, in his mind that last whispered order from Mama, "Remember everything that happens, Tam — *every*thing — for Mama!"

The room had faded blue-and-yellow-scrolled wallpaper and velvet draperies. The carpet was worn thin in spots and there were those knotted little hand-made rugs to cover some of them. Mama had been told that by smelly old Mrs. Lane. In one corner was a big embroidered screen with wood shavings showing on the floor around one corner. Miss Milly was talking — just like other people! "It's hot for this time of year." "You look well, Marshall." Such as that. Now she went to the door of the back parlor. "Launcelot, dear — we have company."

"The ones you said 'advertised' in the paper, Mo-other?"

"Launcelot!" Miss Milly's face got very red, made her real pretty. Her nose looked tee-ninc y small so near Mister Lance's thin, high-humped one. "You'll excuse him — and me, Marshall?"

"Of course, Milly — I don't know how — I mean *I* didn't put that in the paper — "

"It — it was — *very* nicely worded. Too bad Moira couldn't come. I hope her wretched cold is better."

"Much better, thank you. Lance, every time I see you," Pop took the chair on one side of the black marble mantel with the fancy embroidered screen partly shielding its dusty grate, and eyed Tam firmly into the one next him, "you look *more* like your father — your mother, too. I couldn't pay you a bigger compliment than that."

It was clear that out of Mister Lance's uncertainty no answer would

come. Miss Milly from behind the low table of carved black spread with tea things smiled. "Nor could you please Lance and me so much by any other. Calvin *was* handsome, wasn't he, Marshall? I tell Lance constantly what a fine father he had — but I like for others to tell him, too. He might think *me* — prejudiced." In anyone else the little flutter might have been silly, but to Tam hers was unblemished loveliness. "As, of course, I am." All smiled. "Shall we have tea without waiting the formal interval?" Miss Milly was already preparing it, talking easily, making numerous, precise little movements. "Launcelot, get Mother the *blue* pot of *hot* water off the *stove* — the *blue* one, dear, and it's *hot!*"

When he came back in, holding it gingerly, her eyes flashed to Marshall's proudly, seemed almost to say, See how alert he is — how wrong people are!

Marshall felt the tug at his coat. A napkin corner had fallen back from a plate heaped with thick slabs of spice cake. He took the excited little hand in one of his and held it.

The only sounds now were the squeak of her rocker on its stationary base, the soft rattles of silver on paper-thin pink-flowered china. The clean, camphorated mustiness of old parlor gave way to the faint fragrance of misty, almost perpendicular threads of steam. "My, but we're doleful today!" Miss Milly finished pouring the last cup, handed it on a plate to Marshall, with a nod indicated the sugar, cream and lemon. To another she added sugar and cream and set it on a napkin in front of Mister Lance. Then Tam's followed. The fourth got nothing but a slice of lemon. "This cake was made in *your* honor especially, Tam." She used a case knife to put a piece on Mister Lance's plate first, then laughed at the wriggling of Tam whom spice cake affected from spiky hair to round-toed black shoes. All watched his delight as bite after bite vanished.

"Aren't you going to thank Miss Milly for having your favorite cake, son?"

Round eyes rolled up to him helplessly, but a big gulp got most of a mouthful down. With a splutter of crumbs he managed, "Thank'y, ma'am!"

"You're more than welcome, dear — isn't he, Launcelot?"

"Wh-y, Mo-other?"

"See, Marshall, he never wastes a minute! He was a million miles away thinking about — probably about the study he's making of feeding habits of quail — between seasons."

"That's right, boy." Marshall made a great show of interest. "That's the way to — to succeed."

Lance knew he was being praised for something, and smiled happily. "What's Tam pulling your coat for?"

"Tam! No more manners than a — a— "

"His manners are *all right*." Miss Milly put another cake section on Tam's plate. "If he hadn't wanted more, my feelings would've been hurt *irretrievably*."

"His ma'll die!"

"Not if she knows he just took it out of politeness. Isn't his hair — er — thick? I remember when yours was just as — unmanageable."

"Uh — thank you, Milly."

"You ain't supposed to thank people for remembering, Pop!"

"Not usually, Tam, dear." She had taken charge with one raised finger. "But sometimes — like just then — yes! You'll understand later. Launcelot, don't you think Tam would like to see the new fishing pole Cousin Jed made for you?"

"Come on!" An excuse to get out of the room was plainly what that one of them wanted most. "It's — it's — " Long strides had Tam trotting to keep up. No one noted Tam's napkin still tucked into his shirt front.

"I'm glad I don't have to say how much your kindness to my boy means to me, Milly — because I — can't."

"Marshall, you exaggerate." She set her cup down and got the silver tray from a corner table. "Help me get these things out in the kitchen. Some others — may drop in."

"I didn't know. Tam and I'll have to be going — "

"But I want you here when the others come — that's why you were invited — *one* reason, that is." Let down, made uneasy by that "one," he carried the loaded tray to the one-story kitchen in back. Here she refilled the simmering tea kettle, rinsed out the fragile cups just used and replenished the cake plate. "Marshall, has Tam said anything about the boys he plays with teasing — all in fun, of course — Launcelot?"

"No, Milly." Thank God this was not to be another warning against Patsy Garrick! "No, he hasn't. If those little scamps ever do, I'll skin 'em alive! I'll talk to 'em — "

"No! It might only — put ideas in their heads. I'm sure nothing objectionable will happen. It was just something Launcelot mentioned — in passing. You know how mothers — jump to conclusions. If there should be — anything, you'll let me know, Marshall?"

"If you'll let me deal with them, there won't *be* anything."

"And have Nanette Lane saying — Anyway, a Thaxton can look out for himself. Launcelot doesn't need *anyone's* help." She was rapidly getting the tea things in shape for the next serving without any servant. "Another reason I wanted you — you and Tam here today is — Sallie Jane Hicks from Natchez is visiting the Hadyns — "

"Unless I am badly mistaken I'm supposed to ask now if she isn't

the Sallie Jane Hicks who was Sallie Jane something-else before she married — "

"That will do, Marshall Lipscomb! This is important. Her husband is Beauregard Hicks, whose mother Aurelia Hadyn Hicks was the sister of Dorabelle Hadyn Thaxton, my Calvin's mother. That makes," she continued with no attempt at establishing connection, "Sallie Jane's Violet and Little Bessie the *third* cousins of my Launcelot." She smiled as if declining profuse thanks for having given him very valuable information indeed. The significance of the emphasized "third" told more than all the rest.

Marshall could not return her smile. "We were raised, Milly, to think everybody ought to get married as soon as — well, almost as soon as possible. But the longer I live," this was getting more and more difficult to say without offending her, "the more I realize that it isn't *always* true, isn't — "

"By all that — ring-around-the-rosy, are you trying to say that Launcelot — " all the old fire was in her eyes, " — shouldn't?"

That was exactly what he was trying to say. But as so often before, he knew it still wouldn't change her, would only hurt her, and cause another "coolness" between them. "No, Milly." His sigh was resigned. "What is it you want me to do — about Violet Hicks?"

"I was — hasty, Marshall. If I — went too far, forgive me. I do need your help — in a way, there's no one else I'd ask. Shall we — ?" She led the way back to the parlor. Both were in their same chairs before she resumed in somnolent warmth, "Launcelot and I are managing nicely." She must be aware that he knew of the recent sale of furniture from the "closed" library across the hall. "The home hasn't a *penny* against it. I'll sweep streets before I allow that. But — it would be a very drab beginning for a bride — unless — "

" — unless *she* has something — reasonable — by way of a dowry?"

She flushed hotly. "In the old country, it is *always* discussed openly. It's one of the very first steps — "

"It's the sensible way. Everybody's thinking about it, anyhow."

"You *are* very direct — and helpful, too." Fluttery uneasiness was gone. "I can be direct, too. There's certain things I need to know before — "

"I'll write a banker I know well in Natchez — without mentioning you, of course."

"A reply should take — how long?"

"He might have to do a little — inquiring — "

"Yes — certainly." She was dismissing the subject for the time being. "They would appear to be a little late." She peered through the blinds of a front window and the one on the side toward the old summerhouse. Was she thinking of the same thing he was? No.

"Launcelot and Tam get along beautifully together. I'm so glad. They're absorbed in the birds' nests in the lilacs." She turned and came back, stood behind him. "Marshall, is there much talk about — Jed now?"

"Didn't you once tell me, 'There'll always be talk about Jed'?" There was no reply. "When the women *won't* leave a man alone — and he doesn't want them to — what else can you expect? That's really why there was never a — a —"

"Go on, say it: Never a chance of his making Trina a good husband."

"The boy's a lot more serious-minded, even broody, but he still can't see anything unfair in what he expects of her compared to what he — permits himself."

"*Our* men are apt to be that way." Miss Milly's tone was one of satisfied complacency rather than displeasure. "Very, very — human. They put their women on pedestals —"

"— and then *see* that they stay there."

"Naturally." She approached smugness.

"I give up. Answering your question — a lot *is* being said about Jed —"

"I meant — anything new — out of the ordinary — Land sakes alive!"

Tam had come running in the front door and cut across into the front parlor. "They's a whole carriage load of folks a-coming up the drive!"

"Thank you, dear. Where's Launcelot — Oh, there you are. Take your chair and —" She rose to straighten his black Windsor tie. He submitted as a very good child of three might have done. "Marshall, may Tam answer the door when they knock?"

Tam jumped from the chair Marshall had sat him in, crouched in foot-race position ready to "Go!" at the first sound.

Miss Milly laughed in muted delight. "It's not a what-do-you-call-it? — track meet, dear. You'll give Cousin Sallie Jane the vapors!"

When the knocker thumped, Tam tiptoed stiffly to open the door. Without a word he admitted three women and a girl almost grown, then Nelia Hadyn and her cousin, Bessie Hicks, both about nine.

"Trina! Cousin Nathalia! Cousin Sallie *Jane!*" Miss Milly patting the two youngest could be heard above their cacklings. "And *Violet!* How you have grown — a real young lady now. I'll bet with those big, blue eyes there's not a young man in Natchez getting his sleep!"

"Oh, Cousin Mi-illy." The tall blonde girl with eyes bulging like darning eggs fluttered. Her mother approved every tremor of it. "The boys won't even *look* at me!"

I believe you, Marshall said, strictly to himself, and then aloud

acknowledged introductions all around. Lance did the same by just standing, far more ill at ease than the children. Out of such gabbling confusion, could order come? Marshall wondered. It seemed that it could. When there was no longer need for all the tongue-clacking, it subsided — magically.

There was a much larger circle now. The little girls' feet dangled off the floor, their eyes dangled at Tam. Tam's were on one of the worn hooked rugs whose tufts had become of great and consuming interest. Miss Milly began asking about everyone, alive or dead, who had ever lived in Natchez. She tried to catch Lance's eye, thought better of what the results might be, and without interrupting Cousin Sallie Jane asked Marshall if Tam "might" get the rest of the tea things. More than a little doubtful, Marshall nodded. Tam began to run, checked himself again to slow, stately tiptoe. Not until he was back from his third trip to the kitchen did Marshall breathe regularly again. Then he did so and proudly.

Again he paid some attention to the talk. Milly was certainly getting on the record everything she wanted there. Now it was, "I'm so sorry Mrs. Lipscomb couldn't come — head cold — but wasn't it nice of Marshall to bring Tam, anyway?" The almost imperceptible twist of lip in the fat face of Cousin Sallie Jane showed Marshall what she thought about that, but everything about her nodded, purple plumes, Venetian beads and chins. When she took her tight corset off at night, Marshall was thinking, he sure didn't want to be within ten feet!

"It's *so* nice to be on Thaxton Hill again, Cousin Millicent." Cousin Sallie Jane had things to get in, too. "It makes all of us feel so — so — home-y!" Having said just the right thing, she caught the briefest of breaths to leave no doubt she had missed the gilded curio cabinet. It had stood *right* over there for years. "Things change and — heaven knows — we all have our burdens!" She looked aloft, brave tho' martyred. "But *we* can always rely on *what* we are." She beamed a little sadly because Marshall and Tam were unavoidably and permanently excluded.

"*Beau*tifully put!" Miss Milly paused amid passing plates and heavily monogrammed napkins. "It's just as I was telling Launcelot this morning — no, last night — from the careful, considerate, efficient way he is managing this place and our plantation up on North Fork, no one would even suspect the dreadful changes in the times. Not that he's satisfied! Some of these days he'll be making a lot of changes — for the better, too — around here. Everything goes to him, of course — Calvin and I put that in both our wills — the *day* he marries!" Her soft eyes swung to the wilting, lankily sprawled Violet. "Launcelot, do pass 'this lovely creature' my spice cake."

"But, Mo-other, — she's already had *two* pieces — !"

"Now, Launcelot!" Meant to sound playful it came with a hard-set little laugh which cut around Marshall's heart. "See, Violet, how he's always carrying on — always something witty and original at the tip of his tongue. He's worth the knowing — that boy of mine — 'still waters,' you know — "

"He's sweet!" Trina bent to steady the badly rattled Lance with a hand on his clasped ones. Both were pinioned under Miss Nathalia's disapproving gaze: Trina was a married woman.

"You don't have to tell *us* about Lance!" Beads, chins, purple silk and purple plumes spewed crumbs. Only Marshall saw an absurdly small foot slide against one of Violet's very large ones. "We all agreed coming over that Launcelot's handsomer even than Cousin Calvin — and that's saying a great deal. Isn't it, Violet, dear?"

"Ma'am? Oh — *yes!*"

"Bow to the ladies, Launcelot!"

He rose, did so, and as he came up, "Mo-other — please — *now* can I go — ?"

"Why — oh, yes, you have got to see — those people. Mother had forgotten. Ask the ladies if they'll excuse you — "

"Will you?" Before their heartfelt chorus of agreement was over he had reached the door, and disappeared toward the back of the house.

Tam, himself, became suddenly restive at Mister Lance's emancipation. Miss Milly suggested "the children go out front and play." The little girls obviously wanted to stay and listen-in, hear things, but all three sidled out. Fidgety Nelia and chubby Bessie straightened their white dresses and blue sashes. Tam, with head tucked, sidled after them.

On the front porch the girls looked down the slope past the iron stag on the lawn to deserted, dusty Main Street and then squarely at Tam. He looked right back at them. Nelia was slender, dark, and "full of life." Bessie, pudgy and blonde, had exquisitely complexioned face pretty as a doll's and about as thoughtful. "What we going to play?" almost automatically from the placid, doll face.

Tam was ready. "I can be the Wizard of Oz and you all can be — some kind of princesses."

"Why?" Nelia asked, a one-word question that Tam was never to forget: Why pretend to be a princess when being a Hadyn was so much better?

Almost any question was too much for Bessie who — except about one thing years later — always took the sensible way of not worrying about what she didn't know. Ignoring the Wizard-princess suggestion, she flung both fat arms around Nelia's slender neck to indulge in prolonged whispering without ever taking round doll eyes off Tam.

"Lemme go, Bessie,—you're so hot!" Nelia was torn between her importance at being whispered to and impatience to look at Tam, herself. "I can't tell what you're saying, anyhow." But as little girls—of all ages—enjoy tantalizing boys, Bessie kept right on with her whispering.

"Hmmph!" Tam sought defense. "Girls has sure got *funny* manners."

Bessie removed one arm from Nelia's neck, "Boys ain't got *any!* Least of all, you. *Everybody* knows *you're* common as pig tracks."

"Bessie! Don't mind her, Tam—"

"It was Nelia told me!" Bessie crowed.

"Did you, Nelia?"

"Tam, I—I just said what Jed—I mean—" She gave Bessie's plump bottom a strong pinch which brought a thin squeal. "I oughtn't ree-peated it. I'm sorry—even if you *are*."

"That's all right." He wasn't sure what he was saying, he wanted so badly to pull Bessie's tangle of yellow hair, pull it all out and throw it up in a tree where it would hang always and forever waving in the breeze. "I'd rather be—common than—stink!"

"I'm going to tell your old daddy on you—"

"No, Bessie's not, Tam. If she does, I'll tell her mama what she told me—out back—this morning."

"Nelia Hadyn—you wouldn't! Why, Nelia Hadyn, you ought to be—ashamed—of yourself—"

Tam was getting his cockiness back. "Let her tell Pop on me, I don't care. I don't—" his voice sank to a whisper, "—don't giv'a'*damn!*"

"O-oh, Tam!" in abject worship from both.

Into Bessie's light eyes had come the same admiration, the very first for Tam. "He's right nice, Nelia. Let's us ask him to the party and hear Cousin Carietta holler!"

"Bessie Hicks!" Nelia was looking as exasperated as Cousin Nathalia when Jed didn't get home for supper on time. "Tam, Bessie knows they won't let us have but twelve—"

"She'll have to—if we make Tam come." Bessie had gone over completely to his side, partly from admiration, partly because she was not supposed to invite any more. "Promise you'll come, Tam." She was smiling at him the way she had seen her sister, Violet, practice before a mirror. "Maybe, if they see how nice you are, they won't be leaving you out all the time like Nelia told—"

"Bessie!" Nelia was almost to tears. "You're the meanest thing. You know he can't—doesn't *want* to come, do you, Tam?"

"Naw. I don't like girl-parties!"

"It's not a girl-party, Smarty!" Bessie was loath to abandon such an enjoyable situation. "You all wait *right* here!" She ran inside.

They could see her through the porch blinds interrupting the grown-folks' talk. "Cousin Nathalia, Tam's coming to the party."

"What!" the lady-ramrod grew more straight and rigid where such had seemed impossible. "Child, what *do* you — "

"Bessie!" Empurpled fat was clacking beads and shaking its plumes, "I'm a-shamed of you. Why — "

"I'm *so* glad." Trina less quick than the others to leap into words went on, in spite of bristling Storrow and Hicks silence. "Don't let him forget, Mister Lipscomb, it's at — "

"I — I'm sure he wouldn't forget," Marshall had missed nothing, "but — his mother — will need him at home on — that day. It *is* real nice of you all to ask him, though."

"Please, Mister Lipscomb, I'll talk to Moira — "

"Trina!" Miss Milly came into the discussion. "I'm sure Marshall will take the matter up with Moira, and if she can spare Tam, he'll — let us know. It reminds me — when Launcelot was that age. *Then,*" a smile for Violet, "he *hated* parties. The girls were such for-ward little imps. Made so much over him. And, to tell the truth," she pretended to whisper very confidentially, "they *still* do!"

"As we all well know!" Mrs. Hicks's agreement was vociferous. "He's so-o — dark and interesting — and, what is so rare these days, a real gentleman. Violet says it's a good thing for Lance — Launcelot that *I'm* not twenty years younger."

"If you were, my dear," Miss Milly was almost tremulous with delight; Marshall, puzzled, had never seen her so, "no other girl would have a chance. Your mother at sixteen, Violet, was the loveliest creature I've ever *seen!*"

"Milly Thax-ton!" Even the delighted gurgles seemed purple. "You know I couldn't ever hold a candle to you!"

This gratifying exchange continued. Marshall motioned Tam, out on the porch, away from the window. The poor youngster wanted to go to that party so bad he could taste it. He'd get him something. But he had to *start* understanding some day, and it might be better in little doses like this. It wasn't going to be very easy, no matter how —

Trina was saying, "We must be getting on over to Cousin Carietta's. If we're a *minute* late, we might as well leave town and be done with it!"

"Trina! The child is so — frank." Miss Milly both disapproved criticism of Carietta Storrow and treasured it. "I'd have started asking my thousand and one questions if I'd known you had another engagement — "

"*I* haven't!" Miss Nathalia wanted no doubt on this. "*I'm* going to go straight home."

"We're expecting you and Lance for dinner — real soon, remember,

Cousin Milly." Trina was smoothing over. She gave Marshall and Tam special attention, renewed expression of hope Tam could come to the party.

"Tam, will you see the ladies to their carriage?" Miss Milly would never have considered accompanying them beyond the door to the hallway. Marshall remained with her.

Watching from the lilacs, their Negro coachman got the carriage and drove back to the front steps. The details of reloading became of first importance, the carriage being much too small. During the suggestions and countersuggestions, fat little Bessie sidled over to Tam to whisper, "*I* like pig tracks!" Nelia yanked her in, and the carriage wheels crunched away.

Maybe that purple old Mrs. Hicks thought Tam was out of hearing, maybe she forgot there was any Tam. Anyway, he heard, as plainly as if it were said directly to him: "Violet, I do hope you made a good impression. Lance, you know, is the *catch* of Sironia — to hear poor, dear Milly tell it! Is the woman deaf, blind and dumb? Somebody ought to — " The rest was lost.

Who wanted to catch Mister Lance? Tam didn't know he was running away from anybody. And fat old Mrs. Hicks ought to be able to tell Miss Milly wasn't deaf, blind nor — whatever that other was. Tam hated Mrs. Hicks. And he hated her fat Bessie and — he hated Nelia, too, he guessed. He was sure glad he didn't have to go to their damn old party. Maybe, he and Splice and the others would sort of happen by and — gosh, just supposing they could bust it up! Rocks ought to —

"Son! Come inside and tell Miss Milly what a nice time you had."

"I had a nice time, Miss Milly."

"And I enjoyed having you, Tam, *so* much."

They shook hands formally. He bowed stiffly and walked stiffly out. Marshall put his cap on for him. He took it off and put it on again better while Marshall smiled. They walked on down the curving drive.

"What's — 'common,' Pop?"

Marshall's comfortable grin died. "That's — what some people call other people they think are not good enough to — play with them."

"Am I common?"

"Some people may think so, Tam — but that's the best thing about the country we live in. You'll have a chance to show everybody you're not — or to prove you are. It's all up to each man himself. If you do like Mama and Pop want you to — and do good at school — and carry on the business — by the time you're grown, there won't be anybody left here to call you common — except a few has-beens — who won't matter any longer!"

"What's a — "

"A has-been is somebody that everybody thought was important, but now nobody but himself — or herself — thinks so."

"Like Miss Milly?"

"Tam, I'm — ashamed of you!"

This Tuesday of Nelia's and Bessie's party had posed a new kind of problem for Moira. She had thought first of getting Marshall to keep Tam busy at the store until closing time. But would that dissolve heartache two days building?

As much as she disliked most of The Panthers, she would have been glad to have them over. But all of them were working this summer, and not for any father-employer to let them off early, either. That was why she had sent word to Mammy Henderson to stop by on her way home from Hadyn's.

The result had been there would be another party, this one at Mammy's cabin. Invited would be Tam, Jared, Luella, now fourteen, and the scampish, nine-year old Bennie. She would furnish soda pop and stick candy. It wouldn't be much longer that Tam could play with Negro children, in a town like Sironia, and Moira was sorry. Mulatto Jared was the best behaved and smartest playmate Tam had ever had. When Tam had been with Jared, he came home tired but giggly and talkative, spilling out all the funny things that had happened — not silent, stuffed with secrets the way he was after being out with those nasty-minded little "Panthers," all of them white. At times she could wring their grimy little necks for them and enjoy doing it.

If Tam understood about this party, he understood well enough not to say so. He got over to Mammy's about three-thirty. Black Luella, black Bennie and yellow Jared were cleaned up and stiff as pokers sitting on the three-room cabin's River Road stoop. Louisa, their mangy but beloved and loving old greyhound bitch, lay in smooth-swept dirt at their feet looking first at one and then another. All saw Tam coming up River Road from two blocks off, ran to the fence of red pickets that "came" wired into roll fencing.

"Heah 'e comes!" Bennie-Chicken jumped off the stoop and began strutting around the yard one fist at his wide mouth, the other sliding out and back like a minstrel bandsman playing, nothing missing but the trombone. Luella jumped up, face half white with teeth. ("De pretties' toofs in town," Mammy always told her, to smooth over anything and everything that had gone wrong.)

"I'se de recepshun ker-mitty, Tam," Bennie yelled. He played non-existent instrument with one hand and spun a chinaberry limb in the other like a band leader.

Tam's face broke from its sweaty gloom. His thoughts slid down and away from Hadyn Hill with a bump. He turned two pretty good cartwheels in the dusty road, and then ran on in to plop down on the porch. "I'm sure tired out — they had me doing *all* the work at the store!"

"Bet dey didn'!"

"Bennie!" Luella corrected. "Dat Bennie's a caution, Tam, mo' lak a monkey dan — "

"Yeeee! I'se a monkey!" He almost was, jumping from squat to squat, twisting his head from side to side, holding what had been the chinaberry baton to his skinny little bottom for a tail. When he began picking from head to mouth, the others lost all party dignity, flopped back on the porch howling. Bennie could just naturally make anybody bust his sides.

From flat on his back, Tam looked up at the unpainted porch ceiling and the shading chinaberry trees heavy with yellowing balls and paling leaves. "Did Mama send over the — "

"Yeh-uh!" Bennie cut in. "I done looked in 'em. I'se de freshments ker-mitty — "

"Hush up — you sweet thing." Luella grabbed him to her fondly, let him go as he struggled. "I'se de onliest one whut knows *all* whut's in de basket. I he'ped fix it!" Teeth shone in dazzling, honest satisfaction. "What you chillun wanter play?"

"In a minute! Me and mah bestest friend's got 'portant bizness!" Mysteriously Jared led Tam around back, stopping near the corn crib. They were far enough not to be overheard but near enough to be seen and make those left curious.

They stood, each with his left arm on the other's right shoulder. "What is it, Jared? What is it?"

The other laughed and made meaningless whispers with his mouth. It was a frequent practice of theirs when they wanted others to think a momentous secret was being shared. They took some time doing it, then linked arms and strolled around the house, whispering nothing to afternoon warmth.

Jared was *his* "bestest friend," too. None of the other boys was always so ready to play whatever Tam wanted to. But Jared stood up for his rights whenever Tam, boylike, took advantage of mild good-nature. Jared told the truth and, for a boy of twelve, was clean-minded. For years they had been like this, but could not much longer show it.

They sidled on around, completing the circuit of the cabin, and although neither had any recollection of anything just said, Tam cautioned loudly, "And if you tell anybody, Jared Henderson, I'll gouge your liver pins out and — "

"I won't tell — I swars I won't, Tam. Hit's too impohtant!"

"Hmph! Some folks thinks they's so much." Luella sniffed almost without curiosity. "If you-all's thoo wid all dat 'portant *foolishment,* wut you wanter play?"

"Let's play —" suggested Tam with great solemnity "— eating!"

"Tam Lipscomb-Bipscomb-Tripscomb!" chirped Bennie the Chick, spraddle-legged and shaking a finger like grownfolks were always doing at him. "Wheah at's yo' mannuhs?"

"In my stummick!" said Tam. The others groveled in helpless chuckling at so much cleverness.

"We ain'ter goner eat *now!*" Luella announced. "Yo' ma, she say ter eat whin de fo'-thuty train whistles —"

"And supposing the train's late?" Tam drew his mouth down distorting his plump face in moving-picture agony. "We'll all starve to death!"

"Yeah." Young Bennie knew a cue line even then when he heard it. "An' all our daid bodies will be foun' lyin' daid in de middle o' de road all covered wid flies and de en-gineer who made de train late will feel so-o ba-ad he'll take pizen an' shoot hisse'f daid, be foun' lyin' daid in de middle o' de road all covered wid flies an' —"

"Stop fo' I paddles you good." Luella as the oldest wasn't doing very well at keeping a straight face. "What you chillun wanter play 'til 'freshment time?"

"Hide'n'seek!" decided Bennie. "Luella'll be it fust —"

"Why?" she demanded.

"Becaws you's a gurl an' becaws you always is — dat's why! Ouch!"

"I'll be 'it' first." Jared didn't say much, but when he did it amounted to something.

"I don' mind none, Ja'ed," Luella said. "Y'all go on an' hide —"

"Well, make up yo' mines," demanded Bennie in a perfect imitation of Mammy in her imitation of Miss Nathalia. "Nevuh seed sech —"

"Look-ee who's comin'!" Luella pointed up Jeff Davis toward Main, "I didn' know she were 'vited."

"I didn't, neither." Tam pulled loose from a wrasslin' match he or Jared one had started.

"But I'm glad," Luella made up for temporary surprise, "I loves Leah!"

"Do she eat much?"

"Bennie! I ain't nevuh bin so 'shamed. Come on in — you jus' in time, Leah, honey."

"Fer whut?" Leah's voice was more like Miss Carietta's than a Negro's or even a white child's. "Cat got all yo' tongues?"

"No, Leah, honey." Luella was always first to make somebody feel

better or more comfortable. "We thought you knew 'bout ouah pahty — but hit don't make no diffunce. You knows whut dey says 'bout Sironia: 'Hit's a pahty-town, so gather 'roun'.' *Glad* to have yuh!"

A smile, hesitant and sweet, made the sad little face even prettier. It disappeared quickly. "I — can't — stay. Miz Ca'ietta just sont me ter find out whin her washin'll be ready. It was s'posed to come de fust thing dis — "

"Oo-ee! I *clean* fergot!" Luella slapped one meaty hip sharply. "De las' thing Mammy tole me befo' she lef' dis mawnin' were ter git wuhd to Miz Ca'ietta dat 'count o' de pahty — de one at de Hadyns' — she wouldn' have de wash ready 'til some time Thuzday — at de lates'! Is — is she, Miz Ca'ietta, up on her high hoss 'bout it?"

"Not spec'lly," Leah answered, switching her blue dress with the little white maid's apron and maid's white puff of a cap, showing off all she'd been taught in the year since Miss Carietta had taken her over. "Miz Ca'ietta says dem — dose clothes mus' be back tomorrer, though. I — I guess I bettuh be gettin' on back — though Miz Ca'ietta'll be ovah to Hadyns' de rest o' de af'rnoon."

"Ain't dat jes' fine, you boys? Leah's goner stay — Leah's goner stay!"

"We'll let you be 'it' first," Tam put in hospitably.

"I don't like to be 'it.' You don't — neither, Tam Lipscomb!"

"He was jus' teasin', Leah." Jared, almost as light of skin as she, took her part. "I likes bein' 'it.' Hadn' you better hang up yo' clean a-p'on?"

"I believe I will stay — a little while." She spun about fearfully. "What's that?"

The others had heard, too, the scattering thump and thud of light hooves up River Road. All of them skedaddled over to hang on rickety, cypress-vined red pickets. All saw, the minute the trees of the cow pasture just east of Mammy's allowed, what it was. It was Nelia on Sugarlump, her undersized Shetland pony, all white-and-liver spots. They were tearing along as fast as his dumpiness could go. She wore her party dress of white, with blue ribbon run through little holes, her brown hair completely out of its blue bandeau. And she was riding straddle, with a blanket and a halter, no bridle, no saddle.

"Whoa, Sugarlump!" all the children called. He stopped so suddenly Nelia slid far up on his bowed neck, but not off on her own, as Sugarlump obviously had intended.

"Why, Miz Nelia!" Luella crowed in delight. "What you doin' heah? Oh! Sugarlump, he done run'way wid yer."

"No, silly!" Nelia slid from the sweating back down one spotted, heaving side exposing lace-edged drawers and button-waist. Quite unnecessarily she hitched the temporarily winded little beast to a red picket, then took her time to pull down dress and sash and hair ribbon.

The others stood, a row of jaw-dropped little mouths. "The *horse* don't live that can run away with a Hadyn!" She got that, they knew, from her big brother. "I ran away — from *them*." One of Miss Nathalia's hand-waves, carefully copied, plainly included all her deserted guests. "Trina would've let me have who I wanted — but Cousin Carietta had to go stickin' her ole nose in — made out the whole list." She looked around (with the inborn ability to gauge an audience she was always to have), saw nothing but full approval of her defiance "Honest, you nevah saw such a mess, all the boys, sissies — 'cept Charles, Leah! And all the girls ninnies — 'cep'n Bessie, and *she* too fat!"

"How — " Tam had forgotten his resentment of Sunday. "How you know 'bout *our* party?"

"Well — " she was using more gestures she'd been practicing for a long time — a week, maybe, "when everybody that was coming had come, I looked at them and — they made me sick!"

"Sho' nuff, Nelia?" Luella's beautiful big smile threatened to engulf both ears. "Den — whut?"

"Well, Jed says a Hadyn can always figger a way out. I heard Mammy ask could she make a cake for your party. Cousin Nathalia said she didn't for the life of her understand why she *asked*, when she was going to, anyhow."

"Mammy's bin wukkin' fer Hadyns longer'n you *bin* one!" Jared was quick to defend. "If she want to use a measly cup o' flour onct in a while tuh make a cake — "

"I didn't mean it wasn't all right — just — that's how I *knew*. When Cousin Carietta made me 'it' in hide'n'seek, I got Sugarlump through the back gate and hit out lickety-split down Fourth to the River and on around. Guess they're still 'seeking' *me!*"

"Bet dey's mad!" chirped Leah. "Miz Nelia, honey, you bettah go back. If dey whups you, I — I'll cry — "

"Jed won't let 'em. He won't like it about me coming here, either. But I don't care. Come on, let's play — hide'n'seek, you-all!" She looked at Tam funny, then looked away.

He had almost said she had to be "it," but everything was turning out too fine. He knew now if she'd had her way he would have been really invited. This was going to be a *good* party.

Jared was still willing to be "it" first. The others scattered to hide while his counting was loud and very fast. They didn't have to look back to see if he was peeping, like Bennie always did. Jared didn't peep.

Tam ran back toward Second Street and climbed up in the top of the small corn crib. "Nelia! You find another place — this's mine!"

"Tain't, neither!" She swung on up on one of the thick log rafters

and crowded close beside him back in the small gable, her blue and white finery ripping on a nail. If Jared came in the ground door over there, Tam could drop from the load-door and beat him to base. Nelia thought she could, too. "It's a free country, smarty!" she whispered, her loose, dark hair tickling his damp face. "Besides—" she looked out the load-door and jerked back, "Jared's sure we're all in the bushes by the garden. Tam, did you feel very bad—'bout my party?"

"Hunh!"

"Did *not* getting ree-eely invited hurt your feelings? Honest!"

"Well—a little."

"Mine, too." Brown eyes were looking, not just into his eyes but into him. "They all tell me who's fit to—go with and who's not—especially bossy ole Jed, but I'm goner do like I please—soon's I'm big enough. I'd ruther had you at my party than all the rest put together. I wanted to tell you. That's why I—" She had stopped.

"—come loping over here?"

She nodded, then burst into sobs. Wretched and miserable and hot and happier than he had known he could be, Tam just clung there, wedging her in so she wouldn't topple down. "I'm sorry now I didn't *make* them send you a ree-eely invitation. If I'd held my breath in long enough, they—"

"Oh, no, Nelia! Don't never do nothing like that—on my account. I'd ruther it'd been this way—a *heap* ruther! I—I acted like I was mad—Sunday, but—"

"Come on down, bofe of yuh—I sees yuh." Jared was already scampering back to home base. They tumbled to the ground in futile attempt to beat him. They were still running as fast as they could, hand-in-hand, when they saw who was standing just outside the wired red pickets on the Jeff Davis side.

It was Splice Rogan. He had the bicycle Miss Selma had bought at the Store when *his* expected invitation to Nelia's party hadn't arrived. He was grinning disagreeably, sunburn making his big, straight nose a little better-looking, a little less like a rat's. "Kinder 'spected something like this!"

Tam let go Nelia's hand and walked over to Splice with all the swagger he could manage for Nelia's benefit. "You weren't invited up yonder and you ain't invited *here*—neither!"

"How 'bout *you?* Wouldn't've been invited here *either,* if your maw hadn't paid for the—"

"You go on now, Splice Rogan!" Nelia had come running up looking like she was going to jump the fence and wade into him, herself. "I tore up your invitation, myself, without them knowing it—because I hate you. All the girls hate you, too!"

"Not to hear them tell it!" He was mad. Tam ought not blame him, but he did. "And why'd I want to go to a party you run away from to go to a nigger party? And if you want to know what I think, I think you're right where a Hadyn belongs."

"You take that back!" She was grunting between two loose pickets. Tam was following to handle Splice, when there was a swoosh of air overhead. Jared had vaulted the fence. Jared was *mad*. The surprised Splice barely had time to drop his bike and jump free of it. He was a good fighter, was always fighting, liked to fight — when he knew he could win. He thought he could beat Jared. A smirk curled his big mouth.

Jared wanted this fight, it was plain. He hadn't ever liked Splice Rogan, but Mammy had told him she'd skin him alive if he *started* a fight with him. Protecting Miss Nelia was the kind of excuse he'd longed for. All that serious mildness gone, he was narrow-eyed and mouth drawn.

He dived in, got arms around Splice, a foot between his. He tucked it back of one heel. His shove sent them down with Jared on top. Splice jerked like a cat being held on its back, clawing, biting, heaving from the middle to unseat Jared. Now he had. Splice was on top. He was trying to get one hand free to hit with. Before he could, Jared had coiled like a rattlesnake and thrown his rider a foot up and over. Jared was straddle now, didn't bother to hold Splice's fists. He didn't care if he did hit, for he could hit harder and faster and he was doing it. One blow after the other landed, first on one side of big, blooded nose and then on the other. Splice's eyes got more surprised — and more convinced.

The fight was same as over. "You got him licked, Jared, get up." But the blows grew faster, more fierce. "Say ' 'Nuff,' Splice!" Tam yelled.

"Nuff!" Splice gurgled bloodily. The pounding kept up. Looking at Jared, Tam didn't recognize him. Beating and tearing at Old Splice between his legs he was like a buzzsaw nobody could turn off. The white-blue eyes were set hard and almost shut. Tam forgot everything except Splice *had* to be got loose. He grabbed Jared's shoulders, was shaken off, grabbed hold again and hung on — but against force sprung from hatred like this he was helpless. All he could do was grab one arm and yell, "Splice, get loose and run! I'll hold him — long's I can." Jared didn't pay Tam any mind at all, one of his fists still hacking away at the face partly covered by hands as the body twisted and jerked in the vise of skinny mulatto legs. Luella was snatching at Jared's other wrist. Bennie was dancing around in ecstasy yelling for Tam and Luella to stop, to let Jared kill Splice. Leah crouched, crying, while Nelia hit out with an old curtain pole, in her excitement

hitting Tam more often than either of the other two. There was foam at Jared's lips but no expression except blind hatred. Unable to talk plainly, he kept up a low growl like a — like a —

Jared had been jerked loose by his shirt and slammed into the picket fence. By a strength that Tam had never suspected in Mammy! "White boy!" to Splice, "you git on back home. Tell Miz Selma de trufe, or I will. You — Ja'ed! You so much as tech 'im ag'in and you knows whut *you'll* git!" Here was somebody, or something Jared couldn't go up against. "You *know* how you is, Ja'ed Henderson. (Whack!) "Ain't I done tole you *nevuh* to let yo'se'f go?" (Whack!) "Ain't you promised me?" (Whack!) "Ain't yuh?"

"Yes'm." This was from the Jared Tam knew. That other Jared was something just hadn't never been. *This* Jared couldn't have been that one. "Dat ole Splice 'sulted Miz Nelia. An' you knows how he's always doin' ever'thing he kin to hurt mah feelin's — an' Luella's, too, an' — "

"Don't make *no* diff'ence! You stay 'way frum 'im. If he comes monkeyin' 'round you, you git outer his way an' let *me* know."

"Yes'm." Could any voice have been meeker? Now he was beating Mammy to what he knew was coming next. "I 'pologize to y'all, an' hopes you will *ex*-cuse me."

"Dat's Mammy's Ja'ed!" The fight might as well never have been at all. She was turning toward Nelia with as much disapproval as she had shown of Jared a moment before. "Jus' look at dat dress! Jus' look at dat hair ribbon! Dat sash! To think *my* whitefolks could beehave dis'a way! You's *nine* yeahs old. Aftuh all I done tried to learn you!" She had grabbed, was tugging down on the torn skirt and up on first one ruffled sleeve and then the other. "If you ain't a sight. Done lef' yo' little guests — hush yo' mouf!" She spun Nelia around firmly, for another view, sighed hopelessly, then set to work underneath white skirt. "You gotter learn to be nice to folks you *ain't* got no use fer — "

"Why, Mammy?"

"Now ain't dat a question — 'why?' " Already the blue sash and its eyelets were looking better. "It's 'cawse folks — jus' nachully wants to mess wid dem dey ain't got no business messin' wid, an' suh-ciety makes 'em mess wid de ones dey oughter mess wid. Dey does it — but dey don' like it! Theah now. Bes' I kin do in a hurry. Hey, nigguh!" She called to the slumping coachman, who at Trina's order had brought her, "Take Miz Nelia on back to de pahty, an' denn come back fuh me."

The other children watched Nelia weeping and waving furiously back over the lowered top of the departing carriage. Mammy began setting out a cake on the porch floor where the steps could be used as

seats. For the first time she seemed to see there were five instead of four to be served. "Leah, honey! *Glad* to see yuh! Luella tell yuh 'bout Miz Ca'ietta's washin'?"

"Yes'm."

Five paper napkins were laid along the porch edge, each weighted down with a small rock against the stirring breeze. A piece of peppermint stick-candy and a bottle of cool soda pop were alongside each rock. Then Mammy got from on top of her ramshackle old wardrobe — the only place Bennie couldn't climb — Nelia's small doll-ice-cream-freezer. She'd made the cream before day and packed it in salt and ice. She began dividing its contents equally into five saucers. None of the chinaware patterns resembled another. "All right, you-all! 'Joy yo'se'ves — an' you, Luella, put de dishes in de dishpan soon's y'all finish — an' wash 'em careful soon's de comp'ny done lef'!"

"Yes'm!" The oldest, Luella was in many ways the youngest, the most excitable and enthusiastic. "Dis heah's a *nice* pahty, sho'!"

Mammy beamed, talked to herself. "Dat Luella is de *sweetes'* chile — ev'ything's always jus' right." As she waddled inside to primp a little to go back to Hadyns', she added, "Lawd, don' never let nobody be mean to 'er." She viewed as much of herself in the foot-square mirror as she could see five feet away, straightened the white scarf binding her head and the frilly white apron which covered most of her blue-and-white-checked calico. Then she saw something reflected that had nothing to do with her. "Leah, chile, what you doin' in heah?"

Pale saffron face was leaned against the tremendous hip nearest, rubbing like a kitten. It pinched Mammy's heart. Po' li'l thing, nevuh got to *tech* nobody up to Storrows'! Mammy squatted down with a big grunt and put both arms around thin little body. "Whut's Mammy's pretty thing pestered 'bout?"

"Whut you said — 'bout suh-ciety. Miz Carietta say I got tuh git such idees outer my head — but she don' nevuh say why. You — tell me."

"Lawd, honey, you kin ax de hardes' questions!" She eased up, groaning and into her creaking rocker. She took Leah on her lap as if she were still wearing the infant dress she had first been delivered to her in. She talked low, so low that the wondering eyes from the stoop outside would have to keep on wondering. "You's gettin' ole enuf now not to be always put off — Dey's whitefolks an' dey's blackfolks, an' long's de blackfolks knows dey place an' de whitefolks knows *deirs,* dey ain' no trouble."

"What happens whin dey *don't?*"

"Plenty! I means — de whitefolks go wid de whitefolks and de

blackfolks go wid de blackfolks, unnerstan'. An' whin somebody is paht *bofe* — like you an' Ja'ed, well, *dey* goes wid de blackfolks, too, an' if dey got good sense, fergits dey ain't *all* black."

"Miz Ca'ietta say I ain't but a little black. She say I kain't go wid white people and oughter not wanter go wid — niggers."

"What she — " flat, shiny old face was gray with unwonted sternness, "who she 'spec' you ter go wid, den?"

"She say I mus' learn ter git pleasure out o' my work — remember I got good blood in me — have some pride. Whut's pride?"

"I don' rightly know, honey. Hit kin be so many diff'ent things, *all* troublesome — mos'ly."

"Like — whut?"

"Lak — whin you made dem good grades in school an' wuz pleased wid yose'f, — dat's de *good* kind o' pride. It's de bad kind dat causes — things."

"Like whut, Mammy?"

"Oh, Lawd! Theah comes de ca'iage fer me! Lak — when people thinks becaws dey's bettuh dressed, or edjercated, or richer — dey *is* better dan dem dat ain't. Got de right to lawd it over 'em, an' say mean things — whin all de time de way dey acks is showin' dey ain't better, ain't as good! Lak dem no-'count Rogans whut's makin' so much money outer de law an' Mistuh Elliott's lumbah yahd dey bought in fer almos' nothin' — dey's got de bad kind."

"Which kind o' pride wuz it Miz Ca'ietta said I oughter have?"

"Lawd, honey, you don' talk like no chile — but I guess we gotter expec' dat. She means de right kind, honey. Just you *wait*. Folks'll come along fittin' fer you to 'sociate wid, you see if dey don't!"

"Tam an' Nelia are whitefolks. Dey plays wid Luella and Ja'ed. Nelia's de bes' frien' I got. No matter what ole — "

"Now — now! Don' nevuh crituhsize! Don't *nevuh* crituhsize!"

CHAPTER 14

THE LOG-WALLED ROOM was barely visible in amber-orange glow. Patsy Garrick was completing a leisurely change from traveling dress of dark green silk to heavy, sky-blue satin kimono. She wound it tightly about her — in this July heat! More opulent of bosom and hip, she retained much of her dark, obvious beauty. There was still the spacing between her front teeth she had got money from Marshall to have corrected — three different times. Sometimes he suspected the woman considered the disfiguring gap an added beauty, because it was in *her* teeth. Luxuriant dark hair, he noted bitterly, was so loosely knotted in back as to tumble down about her when needed to win him over.

It had been talk-talk-talk for an hour or more. Not one *new* fact, or allegation even, had appeared. She'd made the same old demands and accusations, he the same old refusals and defenses. But there was a difference. It lay in a show of menace, now that for the first time she had told him what she wanted — exactly, hinted at what she'd do to get it.

"Of *course*, I know 'nothing lasts forever,' Marshall. You would oblige me by *not* saying that *again!* Some arrangements can be terminated easily. Others — ?" She shrugged. With her magnificent bosom, she shrugged beautifully, sometimes maddeningly, but this time it was — threateningly? About to refuse finally, he was stopped by a small forefinger rippling his lips all but irresistibly. "Your — feeling for me hasn't changed — *won't!* Why, then, should a — er — boy's 'growing up and learning things,' as you say, have any bearing on us? You say you wouldn't mind if I go back — " she tossed her head toward Syringa and, as always, dark hair uncoiled, rolled loosely down her back " — back to that corpse — but you would."

He stooped as if to flick away limestone dust from his shoes. She was right, knew it — mustn't see it in his face. It ought to be *easy* for a man of forty-seven to quit acting like a high-school boy over his first woman. Would it be — ever? If he gave in — he *must* not. This time she was out for a show-down not yet plainly stated. If he gave in again, it could end only in complete ruination not only for him, but through him both Tam and Moira. "No, Patsy, I wouldn't — wouldn't mind you going back to him."

"No-o?" She pulled him with her down to leather couch's Mexican *serape* of rank greens, blues and pinks. Every breath rasped blue-satin softly against his arm. "Beloved, Patsy's let you have your noble moment. *Now* we'll be sensible. If I listened to you, gave you back to your family, it wouldn't be a month before you'd be moving heaven and earth to find me." Her laugh was little more than caught breath and a smile. "You'll never be able to let me go — long at a time. Why throw away our — love, when from what I've heard about your boy, he's going to follow right in his daddy's footsteps? You don't owe him a thing, did *quite* enough for *her* when you took her out of servants' quarters — "

"If you're joking, stop it!"

"Why, my dear, I wouldn't dream of joking. 'Marriage is a serious thing.' Especially *spite* marriages! As it happens — I approve of *yours*."

He drew back from soft arms become tight and hard about him. "Patsy, I don't — understand a word you're — "

"Not supposed to — yet. You'll be first to know."

"If you think you can make me leave my — "

"S-sh! Who said anything about leaving any — I heard a kind of rustling in the cedars — over that way — I think."

All was silence. From far off came a coon dog's excited howl. "Patsy — help me!"

"That's *much* better." She turned up the lamp wick until it smoked.

He wanted to draw back — felt himself move nearer as she lay back on creaking springs. This was her invincible argument. With all his weakening determination, he tried to rise, so that free of contact he might tell her this would not change his mind again. He did not rise, did not speak — couldn't very well now. Not possibly —

The lamp's flame seemed to flicker, although no wind had risen. Again and again it wavered — then shattered in dazzling brilliance.

They lay motionless now. She was looking steadily up into his eyes, he steadily down into hers. Soon he would be disgusted with himself, but not yet. "Did I tell you, Marshall, about my most recent — opportunity?"

He didn't answer, didn't want talk. He rolled to one side to lie staring at rough cedar-framed ceiling. He wanted to be quiet, to remain suspended between contented drowsiness and wretchedness assembling its forces, grim, accusing in the lamplight. Weak — weak — *weak!*

She had seen he was not going to answer, didn't even want to listen. Again — her shrug. "From the *newest* place of all! It's on one of the old plantations near New Orleans — huge, white columns on all four sides — *enormous* trees and streaming Spanish moss. Has its own boat landing. Only the very — richest — and they have to have invitations — which are expensive. They don't stay an hour or an evening — but for *days!* All 'the girls' are fighting to get on the staff! I was *asked* — and declined."

"Why?"

"You." He gave no sign of having heard. "Really, I mean it. You should just see this place. It's all the idea of one woman, and she, herself, by being unavailable — or *pretending* to be — is 'chief attraction.' This Lola Wagrill has thought of everything that would bring back pre-Confederacy glory, even to adding more Spanish moss and buying back all the manor's *original* furniture she could locate. Smart, too — didn't use a dollar of her own. They say she has thousands in the bank — and there it *stays*."

"*Must* be smart!" Interested, in spite of himself.

"*Is* she! Receives the gentlemen exactly as its builder's wife did. She's the most beautiful woman there — so far."

"But not so beautiful as you?"

"Certainly not. *Much* larger than *you* like them, however, dear." She smiled confidently and sat up, closing blue satin. Throwing long hair back over her shoulders, she tied a little-girl blue ribbon under it and up on top of her head. "She has the nerve to call it 'The Old South.' Every woman of any 'family' at all for miles around is on the war path to have it closed. And the *funny* part is — most of them

haven't a cent left, but with their fine airs can still make rich carpet-bagger descendants stand around! They may get her closed up—but, all the same, she's wonderful. Wish I could—"

"What's so wonderful about a—"

"Well, for one thing, there are enough stories about her past—although she's quite young—to fill books and books."

"What kind of books?"

"The kind that tell about 'the scarlet woman with the heart of gold' and lots more. I've seen her act like Sironia's Miss Carietta one second and next, alone and unaided, as they say, heave a drunk out of the place with one hand in his collar and the other grabbing the seat of his evening pants! She's strong! Supposed to have cleaned out some rich old crook and have him *still* crawling. La Wagrill doesn't show it, but she's been through the mill.' Doesn't show it at all—except around the eyes a little. Why not run down to see for yourself before the place is closed up—say, week after next? Might be able to persuade me to meet you there."

"That why you're telling me all about—"

"Can't seem to get you down any other way—lately."

"Nor this one."

"No? You will when you hear what I've been saving for last. *Who* Madame Wagrill is—and that she offered me—never mind how much—to get you down there? Wants to *talk* to you, if you please!"

"Who is she?"

"Only one way to find out!"

"I'll never know, then."

"You make me—!" She didn't say what, didn't have to, as she jumped to her feet, the blue satin folds swishing angrily. "All right—it's that Lane girl—from here!" She was pleased. The news *had* jerked him to a sitting position. "What do you think of—"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! I never met her in Sironia—for various reasons, but I've seen her riding around with Jed Hadyn often enough. "Now you're *too* interested—maybe, I oughtn't've told you—she really isn't too awfully big."

"Who else knows—her real name?"

"Nobody but me—and old Jalloux, so far's I know. But it'll get around—"

"Why haven't *you*—spread it?"

"'I don't like your attitude,' as they say. She got as raw a deal as any girl ever did. She's come out of it damn well. If she doesn't want to advertise who she is and where she came from—it's her business. How old *is* she, Marshall?"

"Twenty-five—six, I'd say."

"Is that all? Got the business head of a woman twice that. The one big mistake she's made was refusing an offer of marriage — from the richest old blue-blood in New Orleans. The old crook she got the best of told her so. She knocked him cold with her bare fist. Poor old Aristide Jalloux!"

"Jalloux — Aristide Jalloux — *now* I remember. He's the bastard that fleeced Calvin Thaxton and — "

"*Your* Thaxtons?" Her eyes glistened strangely. "I'd heard he met Lola in her home town, had had his eye on her ever since then. Old enough to be her grandfather, he lets her mop up the floor with him and soon as he gets a little money, back he comes for more! How much do you suppose — " she seated herself in one of the low windows looking out across the Bluff to the scattered lowland lights, " — his oil swindle took out of — down there?"

"*He* didn't get it all. There were others working with him. From what Calvin and Bill said at different times, they put up, together, more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And there were some others who put up less. Jalloux didn't have a dime. They told me so when they offered to let me in on what they thought was the biggest thing yet."

"But you were, of course, too smart for them!"

Sarcasm? Did it matter? "Not at all. I did a lot of thinking about it before I passed it up. If I had lost all I considered putting in — I'd've lost the Store."

"And the Store must come first — *always?*"

"No. I've acted the fool and given *you* a lot more than 'the Store' can well stand. It's just luck *I* haven't been caught in a squeeze. It is one more reason you and I are — finishing up — while I still am in shape to support my family and you are — still attractive enough to get somebody with a lot more than I'll ever have."

"Aren't you — repeating yourself — and quite uselessly?"

"I don't think so. You've proved all over again you can wrap me around your little finger, just by touching me — so I've *got* to fix things so you *can't* touch me."

"I see — 'When passion cools, reason returns — ' " she quoted jeeringly. "If it pleases you to have these little scenes of — renunciation, go right ahead. Only — " She glided toward him with, so far as he could tell, no movement under the blue satin. A statue loomed above him. " — you and I are not renouncing *any*thing!"

He looked from her into the rock fireplace. "*That* was the last time — "

"Hah!"

"As soon as I can get it in, I'll send you five thousand dollars. Are you going to agree — or not?"

"Not! Nothing against money, y'understand, *as* such. To repeat, this is *one* case where the woman can't be bought off, as you'll find out when I get *our* plans completed—"

He shook his head slowly. "If you'll get ready, I'll drive you to the Junction. There's an earlier train—"

She laughed, almost pityingly. "Marshall, Marshall! Do you really think I'd take the stand I have—if I weren't sure I could *hold* it?"

He had put on his straw hat, was knotting a dark blue tie over damp white shirt. As he settled into his coat he knew what he was going to say. "I can't drag you out, Patsy—but I can leave you—"

"But you won't!" Not touching him, she whispered softly, "An open scandal—wouldn't be good for business, now, would it? For a growing boy, either!"

"Patsy, I won't be blackmailed. Do as you like."

He stepped to one side and had reached the door before it came again, that same overintimate whisper, "Think back, my dear, the night I *first* met you! Remember how I—? But, of course, not—how could you know that I kept on listening?"

"You aren't being very smart, Patsy. If you had heard anything—of value to you, you would have mentioned it long before now." To hide the fear he could not keep from his eyes, he turned away.

"I told you once your experience with women has in one way been insufficient. Some of us *don't* waste our—ammunition. It was bound to come—the day when a woman like me and a man like you—as you say—finish up. *Then*, I decided, would be soon enough to tell you—" Rapidly she whispered facts only too well known to him already. She stopped suddenly with, "Shall I go on?"

"Patsy," his use of the childish name was at strong variance with the alarm in his voice, "you can't prove a thing!"

"How you know? I was alone in that Syringa 'barn' for hours at a time, remember?"

"You went through his papers!" Marshall was incredulous, but only for a moment. "You wouldn't reveal—Why, he would kill you and all this would kill—"

"I'm not making the choice. *You* are!"

He held his breath for the right words to come. Her hands were on his shoulders now, now moving up the sides of thick neck. "As I said—when I know our plans for sure, I'll *tell* you. And—since you aren't leaving—" He stood, eyes lowered while with the greatest possible tenderness she loosed the blue tie and drew it from his collar. It was like a sharp knife sliding around his throat.

Down in the valley, that same night was just another Saturday's. But any Saturday night was important to Tam. He was allowed out until ten.

Alone, he finished in gulps the supper which had been put up for him. Wonder where Mama was. It wasn't anything unusual for Pop to be late, sometimes not come until Tam had been asleep a long time. But not Mama.

He had been kept late at the Store straightening for summer inventory. When he got home after six, there was another of many notes:

Honey,
Your supper is in warmer — milk in icebox. Get to bed by 10 — remember!!!!

Love, MAMA

Shut all doors and windows when you go

That last? Sounded like she might not be back soon. Wish he knew. Goll-ee, it'd be fun to stay out *all* night doing — things. He'd find plenty to do all right. Some said there wasn't much going on in Sironia, but "The Panthers" always stirred up something. More than once it'd been loosening the hubs on a farm wagon hitched in the crowded Square, to tumble all the store-bought groceries out before it had gone a half-block. Splice liked to turn in false alarms. Tam did, too — a little.

He'd started not to eat anything, so excited at being his own boss. But he didn't have a cent on him. Mama was the one who had decided his pay at the Store should be given to him on Mondays "so he can go right straight to the Bank and put it in." He'd better eat enough to last him, sure wouldn't be buying a hamburger or anything. The overwarm bacon and egg sandwich, cool milk and cup custard with powdered cinnamon on top weren't near as good as hamburgers.

He was tempted to leave the dishes on the table — but not for long. With a number of "Doggone!"s and such over a man's having to do such, he washed them in cold water. All the trouble Mama went to to heat water to wash dishes was just wasted. He'd told her so, but you can't tell a woman *anything*. He dried them on the cup towel left hanging over the back of his chair as an unavoidable reminder. Some egg streaks came off on it, sure — a few. Mama had told him whenever he washed anything not to put it away, but "leave it out to air." Then, never satisfied, she had to wash it all over.

Laid out for him were a clean summer union suit, white shirt and a newly mended pair of light gray knee pants. That meant for him

to take a bath. He ducked his head in the top of the water pitcher—another sign of independence—and flung the soaked mop of hair back. Maybe, he *ought* to wash his bare feet. But they'd be dirty again by the time he'd got to the Square. Anyhow, they felt better dirty. He frowned at the new gray cotton cap, laid out too. Mama had told him if she ever heard of him on Main Street at night bare-headed like that no-'count Splice Rogan she'd wear him out. She would, too.

The new cap was jammed down over wet hair. He shut all the doors and windows. None of them was ever locked. Pop said the niggers who stole had a funny kind of pride that made them steal only from the whitefolks they worked for.

Into a side pants pocket went his new ivory-handled, six-bladed knife. It had taken all his spending money for three weeks. Wasn't going to leave that lying around up in heaven even! He closed the front door, forgetting the back one, still wide open.

It was early—not six-thirty yet. He walked up North Hadyn to Main fast. To look at him hurrying so, nobody'd suspect he didn't have any place 'specially to go. The Square would be filled later, was almost empty now. He could see the clerks in the stores on all four sides getting ready for the Saturday-night buying spree. There wasn't any cotton-picker money in yet, but all the Negroes had been here so long, and their ancestors before them, that the stores knew who to sell on credit and who not to. Most niggers would buy a lot more on credit than when they had the money, could *see* it leaving.

Nope, not a Panther here yet. Past Phillips' Drug Store he dragged his toes luxuriously through the warm dust of The Square toward the steps of the Court House. Using only one hand he vaulted up on the vacant, piped block in the trash-filled "Elliott Fountain" basin. The stone felt hot through his pants, the sun having gone behind Phillips' only a few minutes before. He wanted to stand up and play he was the missing statue, but somebody would be sure to see him and (he sniggered) he didn't have no titty to show.

When anybody in town said "the statue" they meant the one still in the Court House basement. Spuds Bingham had seen it once—or swore he had—and when there was nothing to do he could always keep the Panthers interested by describing its thin drapery, rising to the well-known climax of unrestrained picturing of half-bared stone breast. Spuds had promised to sneak them all in the *next* time his dad was elected dog catcher.

It was sure restful, sitting here, overlooking the whole west side of The Square. He could see Main Street out to where it rose at Thaxton Hill, then on out past Balcom's (the former "Elliott Hotel"). For this moment of dusk, he was Good King Tammas of Sironia.

Confining royal gestures to his mind, he ordered the candy stores to stay open all night and accept as money only orders signed by him. Charles Storrow wasn't to have any. In the process of ordering a candy throne for Nelia, he saw Johnny Cade coming from down South Hadyn. Tam liked Johnny better than any Panther almost. Johnny was twelve, too, and a Yankee. His funny-talking mama called him Johnnycake, instead of Johnny Cade, when she showed affection, which wasn't often. He could think of almost as many interesting things to do as Splice or Tam, even. And he could do more without getting caught, because his face under curly brown hair was so innocent-like. He always carried the flag or the cross, or whatever there was to be carried in town pageants, and the ladies always gurgled over his big brown eyes and "angelic" pink cheeks and "cupid's-bow" lips — not knowing what he said about their faces, and legs and everything else. He was always up to something and so dirty-mouthed even Splice Rogan was sometimes loose-jawed in admiration. Smart, too, in books, Johnny was. He could have made the highest marks last year over at school, if he hadn't spent so much time perfecting means to plague (without ever being suspected) the unlucky teacher who had him. It was hard staying Head Panther, Tam had found, with a fellow like Johnny around. But as long as he could still pin him down wrassling and make him eat dirt, there wasn't nothing much to worry about.

"Hail, Highest Panther!"

"Hail, Next Highest Panther!"

"Tam-my Lipscomb, Elly-ker-sipscomb
Ee-leg-ed, I-leg-ed, bow-legged Lipscomb!"

Johnny recited mechanically, then climbed up on the block and pulled his shirttail as far out as Tam's. Tam hit him in the stomach. Johnny said, "Bastard!" quite amiably. They settled down side by side, twenty dirty toes stuck out wiggling idly.

"What're we going to do, Highest Panther?"

"Considering two — or — three — things, Next Highest."

"Bet you ain't!"

"Whatcher bet?"

"What you got?"

"That — depends — on — on — "

"On whether Nelia Hadyn'll *let* you?"

They grappled, puffing and snickering, rolling almost off one edge, but not quite, then over to the other side. Passers-by watched without trying to stop a thing as much a part of summer's twilight as soft shadows. Plant fragrances were coming back after the day's banishment by man and horse smells.

The fight grew halfhearted in the heat. A third boy arrived, taller, skinnier but dressed like the other two, except no cap. Unmistakably Jewish, he had frizzy hair almost golden. The freckled face, which blistered but never tanned, seemed divided by thin, out-curved nose up and down, and crossways by thick, wide lips. Behind heavy spectacle glass, the eyes were blue and weak. They had been so infected for only one week out of his whole life, but that had been long enough to name him "Sore Eyes" Emmanuel. His father ran the junk yard which, years before there had been any Emmanuels here, had given its name to Junk Street, over behind the Court House. His being Jewish came up only when one of the others got mad at him and used "Sheeny" and "Kricekilluh" to vary the manly routine of "Bastard," "Sonuvabitch" and other real good ones of Johnny's. There was no synagogue in Sironia, because there were only three Jewish families. Sore Eyes' mother practically made one of her home, especially on their religious holidays. Sore Eyes was always late getting to Saturday night Panther meetings, because she kept him in until six anyway. In a larger town he would never have gone with this crowd, but here it was the crowd all boys eleven to thirteen wanted to belong to. To stay in, he did things he didn't want to do, would *never* have done otherwise, for not to do them would mean being left out. That would be failure—and as Mister Jed said, "Whoever heard of an Emmanuel failing where there's no profit in it?" Mister Emmanuel had laughed at that, too, although it was neither new nor funny. Like his boy, he laughed at a lot of jokes at his expense he knew weren't funny.

Sore Eyes seated himself on the step nearest the waning struggle of the other two, and exhorted softly, calmly, "Gouge his eyes out, Highest! Kick his gut in, Next Highest!" He subsided into disinterested quiet, having shown he was taking no sides. With no warning, his head was shoved down between his knees from behind, and he found himself engaged in combat of his own. He didn't have to look to know who it was trying to get a hammerlock on him. Nobody else in town smelled like bruised grass. Part of it Splice couldn't help, but most of it was because he wouldn't wash unless he was made to, and "Rogans are too busy making money to wash." Larger and stronger for his age than the other three, he was to be earlier a man. Least liked of all, the things he could tell about did more to keep him a Panther than anything else. As he bent both farther forward, Splice ground his crimped brown hair into the back of Sore Eyes' neck. He was always showing how strong he was, wore tight shirts and tight pants to show off. "Prouder of his butt than his brains, and who'd blame him?" Johnny was always repeating what had once got a good laugh.

By the time Spuds Bingham arrived, both struggles had petered out.

Hardly anybody fought Spuds. He was like Jared, even-tempered and reasonable, sometimes even thought what might result *before* he did something. Wavy light hair and blunt, almost babyish features made him the most easily likable. He *had* to work, unlike the rest of them. When he got home at six, Spuds helped his mother around the house.

The four earlier arrivals sat up. His "What're y'all scrapping about?" required no answer, even if there had been one. All five jammed together on the statue-block of stone for a conference that could not fail to prove to anyone passing that secret plans were being made. Tonight, for all the whispering and sniggering, all the goose-ing and exaggerated squealing, *usable* suggestions were slow in coming.

"I saw Lopin' on my way here." Splice expanded his chest and tightened his arms so that biceps swelled their limit. Nobody else paid them any mind. "We could tell Lopin' that the new girl at Phillips' Drug Store said — said she'd sho like to get him out to Reardon's Pasture."

"Yeh-uh!" Big eyes in Johnny's angel face began jumping around at imagined possibilities. "We could inter-duce 'em, tell him befo' hand she likes to get it pinched — "

"No — better not!" Sore Eyes was seeing possibilities, too. "Mister Phillips would tell my father. Ungh-uh!" He rubbed his skinny seat in sharp reminiscence. "Better rib Lopin' up to going in by hisself. We could be having a soda when he — "

"But Mister Haley," Tam had been concentrating, "swore he wasn't *ever* going to charge nothing for us again — "

"Gosh, I forgot — "

"We already done almost the same thing to Lopin', anyhow," Spuds got in. "It wasn't much fun — all he did was slobber and cry. We could play duck-on-a — "

"On *Saturday* night!" Splice could spit farther between two fingers than any of the others and proved it. "Saturday night and *he* wants to play games!"

"Well that's better than always wanting to hurt somebody the way you do. You can't have any fun 'less'n somebody's hurt or — or miserable?"

"I'll make *you* miserable!"

"Cut it out, you-all." Tam felt pretty much like Spuds did, but didn't want to say so. "Let's walk up Main to the show and back. By that time, I betcha, something'll turn up."

"Let's all join arms and make any nigger we meet get out in the gutter!" Splice offered.

"Pop made me promise I wouldn't do that no more. Come on." Past the small boxlike stores of the first two blocks, they wandered slowly, then reached Lipscomb's. Tam as usual slowed down — not that he was showing off his father's business, but he'd helped "dress"

the show windows today by carrying things out and in. "We have to be careful not to use too much at one time," he explained. "If we put too much in, folks get all mixed up about what they want and don't buy nothing. We put just a few things in that window that all the women in town'll want, and they come inside hoping they got enough money. When they find they ain't — by that time their wanting-machinery is working — nuff said!"

"Who told you all that, Highest?" Splice never played second fiddle well. "Sounds like a pollyparrot to me."

Tam's red face got redder, even rounder. "That's business. Anybody but you'd know I didn't mean I thought it up —" He was interrupted by stooped Mister Lane's mild "Hello, boys."

"Sa-ay," Splice was off on a subject really to his liking now, "did you hear the latest? *His* daughter's a out-and-out whore — in N-awlins!"

Splice's account improved considerably on his sources, and brought them to the old boardinghouse which was now "the hotel." Nobody was on the front porches, upper or lower. They turned and started back down Main toward the Square. Each time they completed a length of these downtown four blocks, Splice would give a championship spit and say, "Fine way to spend a Saturday night — I must say!" (That "— I must say" was a dig at Miss Carietta.)

By the time they had made four round trips, it was dark. Nothing had offered itself or seemed likely to. Spuds was still suggesting games they could play, but he got support only from Tam, and not very much there. A fellow didn't play games on Saturday night, no matter how much fun they might be other days and nights. Johnny had swiped an orange off a fruit stand, but he knew he had been seen and the Greek would tell his father and he'd get another licking. The others didn't know it, though, and he went through his complete performance of looking innocent and sauntering on, the orange a great tumor on his side away from the Greek.

The Saturday night crowd — not very large — was thickening. There were all the usual noises of farm talk, loud-laughing boys and giggly girls and crying, drippynosed babies begun to droop over sweat-shadowed blue-shirted shoulders. Heat sure brought things out: the smells of babies and the smells of youngsters and the smells of farmers. All gave ground, though, to the cheap perfumeries of the girls and women. Phew! It'd take more'n perfumery to make some of these sows smell good.

"I done had all of this aimless meandering I can stand," Splice announced as they neared the Square again. "If you all want to keep this up all night, hop to it. I'm going to find me something to *do*. Fer me or aginn me?"

"*Tain't* much fun," Tam admitted, but with no idea of yielding leadership to Splice, always after it. "We better have another meeting." He led the way to the Court House steps, yellow in the glare of high street light through tall hackberry trees. Splice at once got back to the idea of tormenting Lopin' Jesus. He might have won out if just then three couples of young Negroes hadn't passed. All skinny, all black, the girls were in pink and blue, the boys in "loud" silk shirts and white duck pants which had come from other and stouter owners. They didn't even see the Panthers. Splice saw them. "Sa-ay — we ain't paid Niggertown a visit in over a year."

"That's right." Johnny was ready-to-go. "And it ain't right to neglect — "

"Remember what the constable told us las' time, Highest?"

"Bound for Spuds — always throwing cold water on everything." Splice was ready to block any and all interference. "'Besides my old man ain't goner let George Cates be ree-lected constable next year. And besides he's so pot-gut fat he can't never catch us nohow."

"What the rest of you want to do?" Tam was already moving off with Splice. Nobody but Spuds ever held back from anything. He didn't very long tonight. As they walked, very carelessly, past Tam's home, he asked, "Hadn't we better go around the woods? If your ma sees you — "

"'Tain't necessary!" Tam pronounced, with no mention of the fact that the only light in their main room was a night lamp, or that his parents were both away from home. To prove his statement he began whistling loudly, and puffed out his chest. The others noticed. Tam'd bet they wished they had their folks under control like he did.

When they reached the dump grounds on River Road, they scattered silently. This was no time to make noise. Each began cramming his pockets with whatever seemed the right size, rocks, burnt coal, scrap concrete. "Splice! That one's too big. We don't wanter hurt 'em -- just scare the stuffing — "

"Bound fer Spuds!" Splice whispered in disgust, but he threw down the whole brick he had selected for his first shot.

"Come over here!" Tam squatted by a mound of ashes and tin cans. The others had crammed close. "Remember — leave Mammy Henderson's house alone. Don't break no windows — that's the only thing they tells on us about. Hit walls and doors. They makes more noise — and specially tin roofs — "

"How about Josie's house? She's Mammy's daughter," offered Spuds, who liked all the Hendersons.

"We kain't make *no more* ex-ceptions," Splice ruled and got away with it.

"Highest," Johnny had an idea, "let's us keep inside the willows

down to *there* — all throw at the *same* time, then run two blocks past Josie's and cut up Palladium. We can be out of sight before they know what happened. Then we can double back on Second to the pasture across Jeff Davis from Mammy Henderson's, and watch the commotion."

"Well, all right." Tam agreed, wishing he had thought of it. "We'll run single file. Don't nobody try to get ahead of nobody else. When I raise my arm, begin throw — begin *firing*. Keep running. Meet me in the pasture — like Johnny said. I'll go first — then Next Highest — then Spuds — So' Eyes and then — "

"That's right — put me last so I'll be the one to get caught — "

"Always bellyaching!" Tam couldn't deny he'd rather Splice would get caught than any of the others, but he couldn't admit it, either. "All right, *I'll* be last. But you all watch me careful for the signal — like this — " Dramatically he raised his right fist to shoulder level, pumped it up once — twice — and on three shot it back and forward in a throwing-motion. "Understand? Lead off, Next Highest."

They trotted through deep dust of River Road into the willows. Everything was black or gray except the yellow and orange door and window openings in the twelve Negro shanties on the south side of River Road. They moved on, about ten feet apart, heads constantly turning back to watch "Highest," and then front to keep from tripping. By the time Tam was opposite Mammy's, "Next Highest" was three shanties farther along. Tam's fist held a lump of burned coal which would crumble and smear when it hit. He raised it to his shoulder. *That* was *his* tub, the one on the house next to Mammy's, right by its front door. Through it he could see a Negro woman ironing by lamplight. Her husband was rocking, slid half out his chair and gazing up at the ceiling. Tam looked, could tell the others had found their first targets, too. His fist moved up once — twice — and with the third motion all were running as their five missiles thumped "like cannonballs."

Windows and doors were slamming, children being dragged in off porches — just like always. Niggers knew better than to fight as long as it was only noise. But if a window glass was busted — look out! All the windows and doors were shut now and most of the lights were out. Josie's was all dark. Thaxton Manor looked like it was setting right smack-dab on top of it. Those in front let go what rocks they had left, and Tam about to throw his last — saw Josie's tub through her cypress-hung picket fence. He cut across River Road running low, darted in her yard, and slammed his rock against the tub with the loudest thump yet. In his fast retreat he hit the fence, tore a bunch of cypress vine loose. He caught up with the others at Second. It wasn't necessary, but all of them kept running until they

had looped around and were back in the pasture across from Mammy's. Johnny busted loose in giggles, was rolling over snickering and snorting — then he wasn't. He'd landed in a fresh cowcake. All the others began rolling and laughing then. This was the best part, everybody whispering what he'd done and exaggerating. They could see a few of the nigger lights coming back on. The niggers, themselves, wouldn't be opening doors or coming out for a few minutes yet. All the Panthers felt fine. They had shown each other what they could do — and there was that about Johnny getting all messed up and what he was going to tell his folks.

Then all the fun had gone out of things for Tam. What had become of that damn gray cap? If he didn't bring it home, there'd be no Tam Lipscomb left, come morning. It had his name in it. Some nigger was sure to bring it to Mama and Mama would get the *whole* story. She had told him a million times nobody had any right to be mean to the niggers — as if it was mean, just rocking tin roofs a little. And then he'd get one of Mama's sho'-nuff spankings, not one of Pop's imitation ones. When Mama figured she had to do something for his own good no matter if it almost killed her, she didn't waste any time — or spare any strength he could see — or feel. Then when she didn't know he was looking, she'd cry. Mama did what she felt she had to do, no matter what. So — he'd better be finding that cap, if he knew what was good for him, which he sure did!

But the Highest Panther couldn't let on he was worried about a little thing like a cap. He'd just have to get loose somehow to hunt for it. He stood up so he could not be seen from Jeff Davis Street and began undoing his britches. "Git off in the bushes!" Splice commanded holding his nose. The others made other suggestions.

"All right. But don't y'all go 'til I get back." Tam slipped into the low, black bush shadows and buttoned himself up, kept to the bushes until he was almost to Lee Street. There he cut up to Second and back down to Palladium. He'd had that dern cap on when he crossed to Josie's because he'd pulled it down over his face in case she looked out her door. But he didn't remember pulling it *up*. Must be at Josie's. If the moon came up it could be seen easy — but so could he. There wasn't too much time. One of the bunch would pretty soon wonder what was taking him so long. Spuds would think something was wrong, come to help him. He ran quietly, looking all the time. He knew exactly which way he had come. Reckon Splice had it hidden? No, Tam had been last. He passed another shack. There was a light in Josie's now. If she'd just come home, she might even've heard them in the pasture, recognized his laughing.

On all fours he followed the wired red pickets and cypress down to the corner. His belly was almost scraping the ground as he wriggled

along to the gate. There it was! Right in the middle of the gate opening where the vines had jerked it off, it would have been the first thing anybody coming or going would've seen: Josie didn't have any back gate. She must've been here all the time with no lights. Reckon was she sick? He felt a little ashamed. She must be, because she didn't work for Miss Milly regular now, and didn't need to go to bed this early from being all tired out like Mama said, "Miss Milly always wears her servants out!" Tam felt worse than ever. He liked Black Josie.

She was all "nigger," weighed about two hundred and didn't miss six feet very far. Tam was too young to know everything older boys talked about most of the time, but he wasn't too young to want to. He understood when they complained Black Josie wouldn't have any truck with white boys getting started off down on River Road—unless she really liked them. She hadn't liked the black ones much better, had run her black "husbands" off almost as fast as she got them, "Becaze dey's trash—ain't got no business in no house, belongs in uh stable!" According to a lot of Sironians, she was the best cook in town, and now that Miss Milly couldn't afford her all the time, she hired out for parties. Pop had said once, before Mama could shut him up, that he guessed Josie was "about the onliest pure-blood nigger Slav'ry Days had left in Reardon County!" He had been joking, but it was true she was the "nigger-est" and the shiniest-skinned of all of them, and proud of it. She carried her rag-knotted black head high, Josie did, never let a chance go by to tell how her Grandpappy Judas had "b'longed to Gen'l 'Lijah Thaxton, wouldn' let no Yankee 'mancipate *him!*" When Pop got started on all the different kinds of pride Sironia was so full of, he never left Black Josie's off the list.

Her door was swinging open. It let out a dull yellow glow that showed her plain. She wasn't sick because she had on a red silk dress. Hanging on the door she leaned out and looked up toward North Fork and then down toward Coon Creek, leaned out a little further, made the house door look as small as one to a corncrib.

Crouched back in the cypress vines, Tam could make out her soft, sighing words, "Bettah run on 'long now. Done bin heah long *enuf*—or ain't yuh?" Her deep hyah-hyah-hyah was all pleasure. "Them li'l devils is gone now and niggers'll be poppin' dey heads out any minute an' braggin' 'bout whut dey goner do de *nex'* time we gits rocked. Lawd, it's sho' hot—hadn' noticed—" She walked to the edge of the rickety stoop and looked up at the big yellow drum of a moon just over Thaxton Manor and came back. "Ready? Heah, lemme button hit."

Her door opened wider and a tall man stood beside her, shifting on

his feet a little. "Good night, Josie." He talked with hardly any mumble, his wide shoulders drawn back. "Like they say — you're sure what I call — a perfect hostess!"

"Lawdy God! De way you's always sayin' one thing an' meanin' — de Lawd knows whut! Reckon I bettuh trail yuh up to yo' gate?"

"Not tonight. I — I might turn right 'roun' and come on back!" He gave her a flat-sounding smack on one wide red silk hip. She floundered away, kittenish as an elephant.

He put on a tall hat and came on out her gate that hung by one rusty hinge. He never even saw Tam, but reared back and walking fast disappeared around the corner and up Palladium. Josie came to the edge of the porch, stood leaning against one of its posts not nearly as strong as she was. She watched until she saw him top the hill and disappear around toward the front of Thaxton Manor. Only then did she go back inside. So *this* was what Pop had meant when he'd said Josie wasn't worrying with black husbands any more. Just wait'll he told the Panthers. They'd feel like he did, that instead of being a Thaxton, Mister Lance laying up with niggers was a lot nearer Lopin' Jesus!

Tam ran all the way, then slowed to walk out of the brush to flop down with the others.

"You sho' took yo' time!" Splice was first, and went on adding a lot of the talk about what all he must've been doing. They all thought it was funny, but Tam wasn't hearing. About to start his big story — he didn't. Couldn't. For all his lost respect for Mister Lance, he didn't want to tell on him — not before Splice Rogan, anyway. Later he would tell Spuds, but not now.

To all the joking about him needing a doctor he made only one answer, "I take my time. *I'm* a man what *always* takes his time — "

While the "Panthers" were aprowl up and down Main, without incident as yet, there was a soft knock at the faded green cottage across Fourth Street from Hadyn Hill. Hazel put down the pad on which she had been jabbing brief notes in unconscious imitation of Miss Milly, and turned up the unshaded kerosene lamp. The small parlor was now exposed in all its clean and ugly bareness. She tugged her lavender wrapper, a holdover from "The Elliott Hotel," expertly into line. "Who is it?"

"Trina!"

"We-ell!" She slid back a bolt made for a door twice as large. "Why didn't you come right on in?" in tones warm with pleasure. "The room is too stuffy for you — I know it is. Just a minute, I'll open — "

"No. Please!" Trina threw aside crocheted light blue from the chestnut hair which somehow seemed colorless. "Compared to Cousin Nathalia's, this room is like being out in the yard."

"Well, the older we get the more we fear fresh air. Wish," this was politeness and nothing else, "Miss Nathalia ought've come with you."

"When she's writing her journal? Won't even remember I told her I was coming over for a minute. My, what an improvement the new —er—Nile-green curtains are!"

"Had to do something. Others had about rotted off their poles!" Hazel took a look at the slender, immature figure, all straight lines. "That's the dress you were working on last time you were here, ain't it?"

"Um-hm!" Trina smoothed filmy pale gray material and extended thin arms tightly encased. There was the scent of musty old sachet—already. "Cousin Nathalia says it makes me look like a ghost on leave from Jasmine Mound!"

"It doesn't any such thing! Turn around. I believe you did get the sag out of the skirt—"

"Not all of it. When anybody is looking I sort of tilt over to the front a little, like the Gibson Girl!"

"You're smart, Trina—the smartest one in that house. But you're going to have to go some to stay ahead of Nelia—"

"I'm getting ready to yield gracefully. Thanks," as the better chair was moved under her. They sat close, edged closer as they rocked. "Jed makes fun of her as 'the great artist.' Wants her to forget such 'un*woman*ly' things—at nine years old!"

"We all know what Jed has his head set on *her* being—heaven help her!"

"It is—sort of pitiful." Trina was letting off pressure to the only confidante she had beside Moira. "All he's expecting of *one* sweet little girl! She's so devoted to him she'll try to be all he expects—but I expect she'll fail like—I have." Washed-out face trembled about barely discernible lips. The gray sack swayed and then slid to its knees, its head instinctively seeking the lavender knees.

"That's right, honey, cry. Cry *hard!* Old Hazel knows you can't let go on the Hill. We haven't had a good cry together for weeks." Hazel smoothed the drab hair back from bony, freckled temples and combed it tenderly with pronglike fingers. "Miss Nathalia thinks she's doing right to tell you 'a thoroughbred doesn't show hurt'—but it's been a long time since *she* had any to show." She patted the head burrowing into her lap. "Like I'm always telling you, I'm glad *I'm* common. Whatever it is troubling me, I let go and get it out. Not that any one way is always best—mine has made a jackass outer me—and many's the time!" Young fingers were gripping Hazel's ankles affectionately. "Want to start talking yet—?" and as the head shook

weakly, "No hurry. Such soft—er—*pretty* hair. Wish I had it instead of my rag mop!"

"I—I don't think I could live without you and Moira!" The whisper was muffled but perfectly plain. "I think Jed for all his fine resolves would've quit me the first month, if you hadn't told me how—mistaken Cousin Nathalia's ideas are about—about—"

"More than once I've wished she'd *married* that horsetail feller—just like to know what would've happened the wedding night!" Even Trina had to smile—a little. "Feeling better, honey?"

"Can't help it—around you!" Tear-shiny face turned slightly, loath to leave friendly knees. "You're—wonderful, Miss Hazel! Everybody in trouble ought to come to you first—why, what's the matter?"

"What you said! Word for word what Bill Elliott used to—"

"I'd give—anything if Jed and I could be like you and him."

"Stop it or you'll be bawling again—just when I've got you straightened out!" Stern asperity didn't deceive. "Now! What's the matter this time?"

"Everything. Doctor Carver told me—this afternoon I'm just not meant to have children. The—miscarriages I've had tore—tore me up so bad that I mustn't even *try*—"

"My darling, oh, my poor darling!" In outrush of understanding, Hazel, remembering much Trina would never know, was sobbing the more violently of the two. She regained control first. "It's a fine one *I* am for you to be coming to for consolation! Hadyn men are supposed to lay great store on having a son, but I doubt if Jed does."

"Yes, he does—more than *any*body! When we first married, Cousin Carietta told me it'd be the one way 'to save him from himself.' She's right, of course. His father and grandfather before him were both—wild until their sons came. Jed'd be like that, too. I just know he would. I asked Doctor Carver not to tell him—yet. He said he'd have to—it's too serious to take any chance of—He sent for Jed—told him—right there before me. It was awful—what it did to him. Worst of all was the way he tried to make out it didn't matter so much. From now on we—we're to have separate rooms."

The racked voice became so choked that little was intelligible. Hazel understood enough. She'd lie like a Trojan to the poor child—if there were the slightest chance of being believed. It was all so plain. Jed'd be tender and kind and so very considerate at home, feel free to behave any way he wanted to—away.

The low outburst was slowing, had become clear, almost matter-of-fact. "I—I moved all his—things into the guest room. I still don't know much more than—Cousin Nathalia about—what I ought to know. I asked Doctor Carver if there wasn't some way—something I could use that would let us—you know."

"Yes, I do know."

"He said there were several — 'devices,' he called them, but none that's '*entirely* dependable.' He refused to take the responsibility of advising any of them. Hazel, you mentioned once getting — something for one of the mill women who'd had four babies in three years. Did it — was *it* — dependable?"

"So far — yes. The main trouble is the — such things are no good at all unless the directions are followed exactly *every* time. The doctors say such women almost invariably become overconfident and careless — and blooey!"

"I'll be careful, honestly, I will, more careful than necessary, because — Hazel, Jed can stand — this, but — but I can't — not now."

"Trina!" Hastily smothered was amazed understanding. "It's more — a lot more than just going to a drugstore and saying 'Hand me down one of those!' I think I could make the mill doctor help — but there'd have to be one fitting, at least, probably more."

"O-oh!" in consternation. "I almost die every time Doctor Carver, old as *he* is, touches me! Isn't there some way we could measure or — but I'm being silly. Will you ask him? When?"

"You get Jed's approval and then — "

"No! Doctor Carver scared the daylights out of Jed. The only way is for me to — go ahead — get — get ready and then get Jed all — interested and — *Then* he wouldn't be so hard to convince that it'll be all right. I can't have any children, but I might help to — curb some of — of his — There's no use my pretending there aren't other women, is there?"

"No. Jed really tried to be a good husband — after that awful Cousin Nettie. I don't think it's all his fault he failed by any means. *They* just won't let him alone. He's lost some of his looks, it's true — " The girl looked up hopefully. "No, my dear, that man of yours could lose *all* his looks and they'd still — know and come arunning. Trina, Trina, my dearest, remember how you were going 'to permit Jed to do exactly as he pleased,' even look up Laurine Lane if he wanted to — because 'that side of marriage' doesn't mean everything?"

Sallow plainness, flooded with color, was somehow illuminated by new, fresh, total lack of shame. "Jed thinks it's funny. I — I glory in it. If we live — the way Doctor Carver says — I'll be wretched when he isn't home — and when he is. It's God's own truth — I'd crawl, even fight my way to him, take every chance — knowing how the fire goes out of him as soon — as soon as — Please don't stop me — !"

Dried-up little Hazel listened as deepest confession poured out. She *had* to help the child. But, first, let her talk herself out, tear herself down. Then they'd start building back. Whenever she seemed about finished, Hazel urged her to go on — again and again, finally, "Yes, yes, dear. What then?"

"That — that's all, I guess. You won't change your mind about — helping me, even if it's made you — despise me for a — "

"My precious! I didn't think I could love you any more — but I do. Don't look — guilty. You're far from the only one a man's done this to. Moira Lipscomb, for one. Not a finer more moral woman in the world — but she'd commit *murder* for hers!"

"I'm tired reading, Mother."

"You mean your *eyes* are, dear. A Storrow never tires of *good* reading." Miss Carietta smiled across the wide hearth of green marble and over the copy of *Scottish Chiefs* he held. Most of his weight she now noticed seemed on the back of his neck in the winged chair of dark green plush. "Sit up straight. It'll rest your eyes."

"Yes, ma'am." He obeyed promptly, a little languidly. She, in contrast, leaned swiftly forward to peck at his white Eton collar. Once bronze-brown pompadour glowed between him and the gas-fitted chandelier. "Mother, what's wrong with your *hair?*"

"Leah, behave yourself!" to the little mulatto smothering sudden tittering between plaid-ginghamed knees. "What — what do you mean, dear?"

"It looks — different, a lot — yellower."

"Now, Charles, you know how artificial light changes things. We've studied that in — Physics. Does — it look better?"

"Oh, yes. Before it was — dull brown, with a lot of white hairs in —"

"Glad you like it! I must write the manufacturers of the new — shampoo I'm using. I — I'll sign your name to the testimonial and maybe they'll want your picture to publish with it. Would you like that?"

"If Leah could be in it, too. But a Storrow wouldn't — let his name be 'used,' would he?"

"No, dear. Mother was just trying to — see if you remembered, ought to have known her boy would. Leah, quit wadding that cambric. Good material costs money."

Charles cut large, light eyes at the plaid figure bent over the petit point chair seat she was doing — rather, doing over — under her mistress's exacting tutelage. In the firelight, Leah's skin looked as white as anybody's. Her eyes sliding to meet Charles's, then away, under bowed brown pigtails were dark. Their whites were white like Mammy Henderson's. He pushed back in his chair until his heels cleared gray and green carpet scrolls. Right now he felt their square, much too warm front parlor to be a cell of moss-green plaster paneling and ornate light gray ceiling. With Mother tutoring him and before

that Mister Calchas, there hadn't been many boys for him to play with. The ones he'd talked to, over the Storrow pickets, looked forward to Saturday night the whole week. *His* Saturday nights were just the same as any other — except Sunday nights, which were worse. Leah, since he could remember the only regular playmate he'd had, was more and more being pushed into the place of a servant. "As well behaved a child as she is, Charles, Leah *is* a Negro. It's to *her* advantage to learn her place — as gracefully as possible." He and Leah both had cried — when Mother wasn't around, of course. That was, mostly, why they had decided on one last scheme together — "The Plot." It didn't look any too promising.

Mother — as she never failed to do — was reading his thoughts — or most of them, anyway. "We can't have *everything* just as we wish it, dear," she was saying for the *billionth* time. "I know you would like to play out at night with boys like that plump 'little pig' of the Lipscombs', but some are born with responsibilities he'll never know." Devotion seemed to wash over him, bringing that same feeling that helped so much — except when he saw other boys pass with fishing poles, or chasing each other, sometimes laughing and fighting at the same time. "We are going to begin short division real soon. You'll both like that — if I decide it's best for Leah to take it."

"Lem'me, Miz Ca'ietta, *please,* lem'me!"

"We'll see. You didn't do so very well with your biscuit yesterday — "

"I'll make biscuit all night if you jus' lem'me stay in de class wid Mistuh Charles — " The lower lids of Negro-child eyes in white-child face were overflowing.

Miss Carietta's delicate features clouded: this resemblance to Nelia was uncanny, if *very* slight. "You want to make Miss Nelia a good maid when you grow up, don't you?"

"Oh, yes'm, *yes'm!* But kain't a maid learn shawt-'vision?"

"I think not. I'm sure now." It was settled. Somehow the children felt the marble hearth widening between them. Both felt alone, deserted. Something they had hoped would never end — was ending. Maybe, it *had.* No, not yet — not before "The Plot."

"May I get my soldiers now? I'm tired — my *eyes* are tired reading 'Scot-tish Cheeves' — "

"Why — " Miss Carietta finished a pink rosebud and flattened its dark green silken background over her blue lap with all the satisfaction one well born could *show* in her own work. Aunt Nathalia wouldn't be able to sniff at this, as she usually did. She'd add a few threads of deeper pink at the heart of the *big* rose, though — if she had any — "Why, yes, dear, why don't you?" She rummaged among tumbled skeins in the rosewood sewing stand at her elbow. When she looked up Charles had disappeared. He could be heard running

up the curving stair — when she had repeatedly impressed on him the fact that a little gentleman never ran indoors. But she'd just *not* notice it. No one was going to be able to say *she* was one of those doting, too strict, overly possessive mothers!

Leah's petit point was dark-spotted with four enormous tears. She waited until she heard, as she was sure Miss Carietta hadn't, soft tread coming back down the stairs. "Miz Ca'ietta, kin I go change my ves' — ?" Mostly she talked like a Negro child, "It itches — "

"Leah!"

"I mean — it sort o' irritates when de rume git so hot."

"Imagination, Leah, pure imagination. But you're such a sensitive child for a — Your petit point! Look how you've wadded it. Here — I'll try to straighten it out for you. Why, Leah, it's damp — you've been crying again! What did I tell you about nobody having any use for those who cry all the time? In this world you've got to do right — I'll guide you, as long as the Lord spares me to — and not grieve over what can't be helped!"

"Yes'm. No'm. Kin I go change mah — "

"I guess so. Hang your vest on a chair, remember. You have a lighter weight one clean, haven't you?"

"Yes'm, I washed hit yestiddy — "

"If it's at all damp, bring it here to me. I don't want you coming down with pneumonia again *this* summer."

Leah dropped a curtsey, walked primly out. In the hall she broke into tiptoed run to the second floor and then up the second flight to her own little room, once "the observatory." Her few clothes were kept here, but she slept on a floor pallet beside Miss Carietta's bed. She skinned out of the old linen vest she had on, which was very comfortable, and into the cotton one which wasn't dry by any means. Then she tiptoed downstairs.

Charles was sitting by the window of the dark kitchen. Strong moonlight made him more than ever the picture of the head on the Sunday School card she had saved. Miss Carietta had said it was Hoffman's "Christ," that she agreed it did have "a suggestion of Charles, although not that certain air of breeding *all* Storrows have."

"How'd you get out?"

"To change vests — here, button me up de back — no, better leave dem two unbuttoned. She knows I kain't reach 'em. Got de string?"

"Sure. Get the pans and things."

Leah crept to the pantry in the darkness, and came back with a tin clothes boiler half as high as she was. By putting a chair on the table, Charles was able to hang the boiler on the nail up over the back door. Leah's trip to the pantry was repeated. Other tinware joined the boiler, was tied to it.

Now the nail couldn't be trusted to hold more. A long, taut string

was run from a boiler handle to the brown china knob of the back door.

"I'll hold the boiler and you open the door, Leah, just an inch or two — to see — "

Leah obeyed. "The Plot" would work! When Melissa came in, in the morning, to get breakfast — she was going to get a surprise. Just what Charles and Leah were going to get hadn't been figured out yet, but it would probably be a tearful talking-to for Charles and a switching for Leah. Miss Carietta could sure switch or spank when she felt she had to.

"How long've we been gone, Leah?"

"Not long. You better git back in yonduh fust."

"Where's Leah?" he asked innocently, again inside moss-green walls.

Miss Carietta shot him a calculating look, and then raised rose-thread to bite it, suddenly hiding most of her face. "She's — changing, I believe. Decide not to play with your soldiers?"

"Ma'am? Oh, yes'm. It's — hot in here — " He plumped down in his chair hard.

"Charles!"

"I'm sorry — I forgot. Guess I was so anxious to get back to 'Scottish Chee — ' "

"Yes?" Miss Carietta was biting thread again and quickly.

Why had she said "Yes?" that funny way?

Leah tiptoed in, so that her unbuttoned clothing could not possibly be seen by Charles. She backed up to Miss Carietta. The pink rose masterpiece was again laid down while the cotton vest was felt. "Leah, this feels a little damp."

"Hit don't — to *me,* Miz Carietta!"

"So hot-natured! Did you hang your linen you-know-what on a chair like I told you?"

"Yes'm — I think I did — I'm almost sure — gosh — excuse me — I mean, I better go see — "

"Never mind — it'll be bedtime soon, anyway, and you can see then. Think you can sit down and really apply yourself to your piecework now? You won't be much help to Miss Nelia *later on* if you don't learn these things while I'm here — " She looked at Charles, melted as she saw tears spring to his eyes. " — to teach you."

The quiet now was smooth, heavy, varied only by the settling of firewood, a gust of vagrant air in the old chimney or a sigh of close application as Leah completed another corner. Occasionally her eyes caught Charles's. Secret childish amusement was too great to be contained, or to pass unnoticed. No one but a mischievous child would have thought it could.

"I have some things to attend to." Miss Carietta deposited beautifully worked roses and skeins of thread on her chair. She shut the hall rear door behind her and waited for the muffled giggling she had known would follow.

She lit the kitchen lamp Melissa always left beside her want-list pad on the table just inside the back door. String leading upward from the doorknob fairly stood out. Just as she had surmised. Mercy, all those things hung up there could put poor Melissa in bed! She started determinedly back toward the living room, then with sudden inspiration began to untie the knob end of the string. Quickly and decisively, once she had settled her course, she wrote on the want-list in large letters:

> Melissa, Master Charles and Leah are playing a joke on you. Stand *outside* and pull the string. Pretend you can't guess who played such a trick on you!
>
> Miss C.

and hung it on the outside knob.

She returned to the living room, and gracefully banked the grate for the night. "Bedtime!" Both children started up the stair. She put out the lamp, and followed. Charles went to his room at the southwest corner of the second floor. Leah's, on the third, was above it. Miss Carietta's was the southeast rear bedroom. The little girl slid her pallet from under her mistress's high bed, stood beside it waiting.

"Go on up and undress, Leah — needn't help me tonight." Miss Carietta went into Charles's room where moonlight was lamp-bright. He had hung his clothing in wrinkles on the chair at the head of the bed, was already in it. She started to correct him, but corrected the fault instead, silently. He had forgotten to open the window again — but it wasn't well to correct a child too much. She attended to that, then smiling to herself, bent over him to arrange his covers. Two little arms shot from under them, pinned her cheek to his. "Charles! Don't — !"

"Sea-clampers got you. Won't never — ever let you go! Going to drag you down to the bottom of the sea."

"Darling! Please, *le-et* Mother go." She pretended to struggle in a suffocation of mutual affection. This game of theirs was omitted only when he had been put to bed in disfavor, following which he never slept well, she not at all. She did love him too much. She knew that, but she certainly wasn't letting it make her spoil him, like that spiteful Nanette Lane had said. A son needed his mother's love always, but more at a certain age ("at a certain age" was always to mean whatever age Charles was at the time). "Let me up, Mister Sea-Clamper, and I'll pay a forfeit — "

"What'll it be?"

"Sea-Clampers always know — don't they?"

"Let me think — "

Now Charles was undergoing the old inner struggle. If he really loved her as he should, he'd tell her about the joke on Melissa. But if she got that out of him, it would make a tattletale of him. She wouldn't want him ever to betray a confidence, but to his own mother it wouldn't be betrayal — would it? But if he didn't and she — she *died!* Then he'd be —

His warm tears were on her cheek. "Charles! What is it?"

"I — I was thinking — " The small body was shaking with grief. "And I thought — how it'd be if you died and left me — "

"Oh, my darling! You mustn't." Quickly she kissed his moist eyes and cool little nose. Unwilling to trust her voice further, she tucked his arms under the sheet. She must get out of the room before she started behaving "worse" than he was. God, show me how to make my precious boy into the great man he's meant to be — and — forgive me, if I *am* more proud of a son than I should be, because — because *You* understand —

Not many in Sironia could have believed their eyes had they beheld the inflexible Mrs. Storrow out in the hall crouched at the head of the stair curve, weeping uncontrollably — and joyously.

The kitchen door's knob might have been wedged tight for all Trina's power to turn it. She had been afraid it would be like this, that at the last minute when the time came from which there could be no retreat, she'd be unable to go on. It was weakness. All the Storrows who had ever lived hated weakness, right next to dishonor and discourtesy. Suppose General Hugh or Colonel Leonidas had let things that *might* happen hold them back! Blind concentration on what had to be — that was the only way.

She turned the knob and entered. Here was dim lamplight and dead summer air, after-supper smells and those of acrid lye soap. Here were slow-moving, placid Mammy and children all about and underfoot.

"Whee-ee-ee — " Trina felt her white-wrappered waist seized from behind. "I won't let go until you promise to read to us — *all* night!"

"Nelia! Leah's been telling you again how Charles gets his way! Well, young lady, it won't work with me. Besides Cousin Nathalia says bed is for sleeping."

"Who's going to tell Old Dill Pickle?" Pert, dark face poked under the white wrapper sleeve and looked up, expecting a tender, freckled

smile. Not tonight. "What's the matter, Trina-Bambina Eller-Ker-Seener?"

"Matter — is something the matter? Now you children run outside and let Mammy finish cleaning up — "

"Dey don' worry me none, Miz Trina. Don' feel nachul 'lessn I'se bothered 'most to death wid 'em. Y'all done heared Miz Trina. Git!" She shooed out a mutinous, laughing Nelia and gleaming-black Luella along with the more serious yellow Jared and shiny-eyed Bennie-Chicken. They knew enough to "shoo" when Mammy said so.

"Seems chillun is gettin' wusser an' wusser." She shut the screen door and hooked it to be sure there were no young faces poking back in. "An' de very wust paht is, de wusser dey gits de mo' I loves 'em! I gotter do sump'n' 'bout dat — sho' is! You add-vise me."

Trina shook her head doubtfully. "I can't even tell myself what to do."

"M-*mm!* So-o dat's whut's de mattuh!" She took the last supper dishes from the pan of rinse-water, and laid them out upside down on wooden drainboard. "Wanter cry on Mammy's shoulder a spell? Denn we kin talk. Hit's 'bout *him* — ain't it?"

Trina nodded. Faint color bitten into pale lips only made her skin and hair more drab. "I'm not going to cry. Not right now, anyhow."

"Say you ain't?" Anything except a real cry to begin with was a mistake, her whole manner said. There was no immediate answer. She sighed her aproned fat down into the nearest kitchen chair and from long habit slipped off lopsided house shoes, cut to shreds for comfort. Gnarled, calloused feet spread bared toes wide.

Trina was backed against the door she'd entered. "Mammy, have you seen — the new girl at the skating-rink ticket office — ?"

"Who's bin overflowin' at dey big mouth *now?*" Mammy's indignation was steamy. It was fitting for *her* to know what Mister Jed was up to, but for somebody to be pestering this sweet child with something that couldn't be helped, leastways not with a man like him, was a downright shame. "I'll bet dat Miz Hazel done bin puttin' idees in yo' head ag'in. Ain't satisfied wid runnin' her own husban' crazy — "

"She didn't run Mister Elliott crazy — !"

"If he'd'a'lived long enuf, she woulda!"

"Mammy! You don't care what you say when somebody doesn't do the way you think they ought to. I didn't believe Mrs. Lane — I *asked* Miss Hazel to find out — "

"Ain't you 'shamed!"

"No, I'm not. Yes, I am — a little. Tonight's the — night he's supposed to drive by for her, isn't it — when the rink closes?"

A dark, worrisome feeling was followed by the certainty that this

was no time for argifying. "Yas'm — leastways, folks say hit's Tuesdays."

"She's pretty — isn't she?"

"Ah say pritty is as pritty *does!* Whut *fer* you askin'?"

"I — " She was ghastly now, the loose white dress dangling as on a nail in the wall, not a live body. "I — I'm not sure now — "

"Tri-ina!" came in muted shriek.

"Want me ter go 'tend to 'er?"

"No, she wants me. Mammy — " After another wait and repeated calls from Miss Nathalia, Trina whispered fast and low to Mammy and then hurried toward the front of the house.

"It's about time! I've called you four times."

"Five, dear. What is it?"

"What's what?"

"Don't you want me — for something?"

"Must I *want* you for something every time I call you? Come on in and — talk to me."

"Later, dear, I've things to — to — As soon as Jed comes in, please tell him I want to see him — upstairs."

"Meaning it's none of *my* business, I presume?"

"No-o — no, certainly not!" And as she ran noiselessly up the carpeted stairs she added, to herself, "Yes!"

In her bedroom (that had been *theirs* until a week ago) she sought something to keep her busy. Just anything would do in the prim room which needed no straightening. Its gray rug and wild-rose wallpaper and bird's-eye maple furniture were no more like its former male occupant than he was like — Trina. Even she had laughed at powerful, hairy legs extending down from monogrammed, side-slashed nightshirt when silhouetted against wild roses and bird's-eye maple. Before the dressing table, panic was in the face which all but leapt at her from three narrow mirrors. If ever there was a time when a lady would be justified in using "paint" on her face — ! From the back of her glove drawer, releasing an upward gust of lavender, she drew the round cardboard box "Rouge Par Excellence" and broke the seal. It had been there how many years? She didn't know, except that she had had Hazel buy it at Phillips' Drug Store for her. Trina could not afford to be seen doing so.

It did help. A little more — now she had too much on. Suppose it wouldn't come off! (The advertising on the box said it would stay on better than any other.) What could she do but cover up with another layer of powder if it didn't. Jed would laugh and everything would be wrong. Why hadn't she had sense enough to try the stuff before this, when there was time to experiment? That would have saved all — but it was coming off. Easily. Suppose — in the morning

there would be pink smudges down the front of his funny white nightshirt! There would be — unless she let him take it off! She'd better wipe most away — not all, for it did help — a great deal. Strange how it had given her eyes a sort of — glitter. She'd pull the rose-silk light shade down a little more, had to bend its wires to do it, one of them broke. "Tarnation!"

"Profanity, my dear?" Mocking voice came from the curtained washing alcove between their rooms. How he had got there without her knowing was characteristic of the heavy man who moved like a woods panther. "It has never yet solved a *lady's* problem!"

"Oh, Jed! Don't make fun of me all the time. This old shade is — worn out — "

"I'd wear out too, if you twisted me until I — "

"I didn't — twist it — much — "

"Just enough to — bust it?"

"Quit, now. Oh, I didn't mean for you not to kiss my cheek — *if* that's what you were going to do. You haven't — lately — "

"What's that funny smell? Trina!" His laugh rumbled and exploded, was one of the countless things about him she loved most. "You *painted* woman!" He was so "tickled" he had grabbed her playfully, his shaking body shook hers, too — thrillingly.

"I wouldn't mention *anything* of an — olfactory nature if I were a certain — person."

He sniffed down at his brown leather jacket. "Hmm! No doubt about where I've been, is there?" He released her, and made for the alcove. He sloshed water from a pitcher covered with hand-painted morning-glories into its matching bowl. "Never saw a nigger boy yet that'd wipe a horse down right if I didn't happen in and out — and the gentle fragrance of manure dust does linger — "

"Jed!"

"Ex-*cuse me!*" The gray shirt came off over his head exposing the top of summer union suit. "And excuse me again — such indecency!" The only sounds were splashing and then those of undressing and the rattle of curtain rings, the fan of gray draperies liberally strewn with wild roses. "I can't find my blue serge suit."

"I — " She was having difficulty with her ribbons. "I sent it down to Rasczik's to be cleaned."

"My God, Trina! I — I'm sorry, but I told you I'd need it — Tuesday night — "

"I know. That's *why* I sent it out. It — it didn't need any cleaning Mammy couldn't have given it."

"What's the matter with you?" The flowered curtains parted with rattling brass rings to show him, black hair bushing out above red face. The sight of his great body fused with an aroma not part of the

stable to sway her toward him — in her pink-ribbon-run china silk nightgown. "Are you sick, Trina? The paint's standing out like two — danger signals. Sit down quick before you fall."

In helping her down, he was pulled with her, lay beside her on the bed now, her whispers seeming to come not from blood-starved lips but from the thick, black mat of his chest. "Don't make me say anything, Jed. Just — just — "

She was moving as Hazel had told her, as she had never moved within his arms. Her lips were open to his as they had never been. "Trina, honey, let me go before I — You know we mustn't."

"Jed — it's — it's all right. The mill doctor said so — fixed me one of — those things. There *can't* be any — trouble. Why, Jed Hadyn, you're blushing."

"Tri-i-ina!" in piercing, querulous tones of Aunt Nathalia from belowstairs.

"Answer her, Trina. She'll keep up that squawking until you do."

He was holding her more and more as she wanted to be held — "Let her!"

Neither knew how long she did keep it up, ending in a sharp definitive "We-ell!"

By that time a lot of him was smeared with Rouge Par Excellence. What was left on her mouth was glued to one of his wrists. When she gave no sign of ever removing the light, lavender-scented finger from his lips, he bit it lightly.

"Oh, Jed! That hurts — good," drowsily.

"Trina, you took advantage of me. There is still — danger."

"No, there isn't. I'll always be as much a wife to you as they'll let me — maybe, more." The last was so low he didn't hear — nor had she meant him to.

He raised up and looked down through the pale eyes into a heart that should have stirred him, but did not, only made him humble. "Honestly, Trina, I'd give anything I've got to be all you deserve."

"Never mind. When we were first married — I hoped, but now I know if you loved me as much as I do you — no telling what'd happen!"

He seemed sleepily puzzled. "I'm not going to hurt you any more — I promise."

"Yes, you will, Jed. You can't help it. But if you'll just be like this — *some*times — "

" 'Bout thirty minutes from now?"

"Jed!" She slapped him hard then kissed the stinging cheek. "I've *got* to get downstairs and smooth some ruffled feathers."

"I s'pose so. It's not going to be easy."

"No — but she'll come around. I did send the blue serge out to be

cleaned, but it came back this afternoon. It's in its box under your bed. You can still be on time for your —"

"Don't think I'm going —" Pitiful: the big baby trying to be fair. "No, I'm not. Send up one of the niggers to take a message for me —"

"If it's to the girl at the skating rink —" She moved around the hall door slowly. "I've already sent her word you can't come —" She slammed the door and scuttled down the stairs, just in time to escape pursuing (and laughing) vengeance — still pursuing — looking so funny and — in another *second* he'd catch her! "Oh, Cousin Nathalia! Can you come out in the hall just a minute?"

In triumph she flung a look at him, backing up the steps in full retreat, as astounded as she. Trina Hadyn was thumbing her nose at him.

CHAPTER 15

PERHAPS IT WAS the hot, dry weeks. Perhaps it was the fact that school would begin in a few days. Perhaps it wasn't any one thing. What happened that day had to happen sometime. What Tam had seen down on River Road that night after the rocking (which he had told no one) had a lot to do with it, for if he hadn't felt somehow that Mister Lance had pulled himself down off Thaxton Hill, he would never have taken part in all the Panthers did that hot Thursday of late August.

Most of them had quit their summer jobs for a little "real vacation," and had planned to spend the afternoon in the swimming hole below towering Devil's Pantry. But when they met there around three, it was to find a crew from the City Hall reinforcing a caving bank on the River's town side. It didn't do any good to say they wouldn't get it their way. The crew knew better. They liked to boss kids around, because there wasn't anybody else they could. They told the Panthers, "Clear the hell out of here!"

Yelling nasty names from a block away didn't help much. Those

old bastards seemed to get more fun than anything else out of their abuse.

"We can go in up the River a ways," the Highest Panther suggested.

"Not enough water to float a duck!" Splice blowing his big nose on one plaid gingham shirtsleeve was quick to object. He was right, too. "If you got any more sug-ghes-shuns like that, I'll nominate you for Lowest!"

"Well, there's that hole the other side of Niggertown Bridge—"

"Yeah—a little tee-nincy one—'bout so big!" Splice held a thumb and forefinger a quarter-inch apart.

"That's better'n standing around with di-reah from the mouth." It was Spuds, of course, smoothing things out. "If Splice don't wanter come—he sho' don't have to."

"Who says I don't *want* to." Splice was back in place again. The five of them with five parting obscenities for the City workmen moved up the willow-heavy bank.

"Wanter get Jared—to make six—and play 'one-eyed'—?"

"'Bound for Tam!" Splice mumbled. "Trying to get that damn nigger back in somehow."

"Jared ain't no ord'nary nigger." Sore Eyes lined up on Tam's side.

"The hell he ain't!" Splice was on sure ground. "*All* our folks have told us we *got* to quit being on ee-quality with him. Say *that* ain't so!" None of them could.

"*I* wish we could!" Spuds said, and knew he spoke for three others. "Wonder what Mister Lance thinks *he's* doing." Spuds pointed at the tall, straight-backed figure, swinging jerkily along River Road, flourishing an old broomstick like it was the finest malacca cane. His clothes and "genuine Panama" hat were old, very old, but so clean that they'd fool anybody for a minute. While walking, he'd turn side to side to watch a bird or, maybe it was some kind of bush or flower he wasn't sure of. At this distance he was as fine-looking a man as the town had.

"Behold!" Splice spraddled his legs, squat and thick in short pants, like the barker at a tent show, "'The Catch of Sironia!' The ma-an all the gals wanter diddle—damn!" He'd stumped a thick, bare toe so hard it had loosed a rock. "Tell you what—!" He picked up the rock with one hand, rubbing the dirty, blooded toe with the other, and then hoisted one foot like a star baseball pitcher and pretended to throw at the old panama. "We could give *him* the Lopin' Jesus treat*ment*—teach him not to try to marry decent girls. We sho' could if it wasn't for Highest, always bowing and scraping before folks better'n he is."

"We *couldn't* chase Mister Lance, and you know it!" Spuds blurted. "He kain't help it none if—"

"Got *you* buffalo-ed bad as ole asskisser-Tam here!"

"A lot of room—" Tam's insides had come to a boil over the way the Thaxtons thought about Mama; the fine Thaxton home; then—*him* nigger-diddling down on River Road; and, maybe, a lot of other things that had been stewing a long time. "A lot of room you got to talk, Splice Rogan, the way your dad 'bows and scrapes' every time Miss Carietta tells him where to head in."

"Maybe, now—but just you wait. Someday the shoe'll be on the other—" He cut off quick. He had been repeating what he'd been told not to. "But, anyway, the Rogans don't go around bowing and scraping and ass-kissing no half-wit—just because his name's Thaxton. Like *you* do!"

"I do?" All that—all that inside was making Tam swell in his collar and sweat all over. A nigger-diddler was sure something to be looking *up* to! "Sa-ay I do? I—I'll show you." He ran to the nearest of the Panthers' "emergency rock piles," followed by all the others. Even Spuds's good judgment couldn't stand up under what he'd be called if he stayed out of this.

Their pockets crammed with rocks, the Panthers according to usual tactics separated. One walked on each side of River Road, the other three out in its middle, abreast. All kept their hands in their pockets. They walked fast, then faster to overtake him. If they ran, somebody might see, know something was up, even try to stop them.

Now they were closing up, watching Mister Lance and watching Tam. His left fist moved into position at his shoulder. All the Panthers loosened, then tightened grips on rocks inside their pockets. Any second now— No, dern it!

Mister Lance had reached Mammy Henderson's gate. Jared came down from scrubbing the front stoop, barely able to walk with the washtub of dirty suds to be emptied in River Road. He grinned at Mister Lance in apology because he couldn't tip his piece of a felt hat, and almost lost his balance. Mister Lance opened the gate and took one handle of the sloshing tub. Jared knew this wasn't "fittin'," held on to both until the dirty water had been dumped, all sudsy and smoking in a drain ditch.

Couldn't throw yet. Might hit Jared. Even if they didn't, no telling what he'd do to help Mister Lance. One against five wouldn't stop Jared. Tam had seen him take a beating once from a drunk tramp, and get up still fighting. He'd bet old Splice hadn't forgotten that time at the party—either. "Hi, Jared!" Tam waved a rockless hand, felt low down for hurrying on by. He saw Jared's mouth quiver—just once.

Mister Lance hadn't seen them, had stopped again, up by the Woods Pasture, to search real interested-like in the weeds—for nothing, probably. Now he was moving on toward North Thaxton. They followed, in a bunch now. Jared must know what this spread-eagle formation

was used for, but didn't think it possible it was aimed at Mister Lance. After one curious look at them, he got back at his scrubbing — on the steps now.

Still in sight of Jared, they saw Mister Lance reach the northeast corner of the rusted iron fence at the rear base of Thaxton Hill. Bound for him: he'd begun his dragging of broomstick-cane across iron pickets — rat-tat-tat-tat. Just like a kid, he'd smile up at the hot blue sky through still, dusty hackberry branches until his cane missed a picket. Now he was counting with a long forefinger the cheap, jerry-built little houses which had risen between two big old homes set far back from Palladium across from Thaxton Hill.

"Hurry, Tam!" Splice muttered. "It'll be too late after he turns in the side gate."

"All right, you-all!" Tam's fist rose again, shot up for "one" — up for "two" — and at "three" five rocks whizzed across the half-block. All of them were small except Splice's. *His* was half the size of a hen's egg, could kill a man! His missed. Two of the others struck, one midway Mister Lance's back, the other the old panama. One hit an iron picket with a loud ping-g-g. The tall man stopped, stood petrified. He just didn't know what was happening nor what to do about it — then did the worst thing he could have. He turned slowly, smiling friendly, doubtfully. Splice's second large rock hit his shoulder with a thump on bone that could be heard. The others missed now. Still he couldn't take it in. His smile was getting so wide it was like a skull's, quivering. Then there was first recognition. "Tam — what's the matter, Tam?"

Tam couldn't answer, turned just in time to knock from Splice's hand a half-brickbat which could have knocked Mister Lance senseless. The Panthers were all about the trembling man now, had him backed against the fence. With his big muscles he could have licked the whole gang — if he'd known how to tell those muscles what to do. Splice and Sore Eyes poked sticks at his stomach. Mister Lance jerked himself straight. His dark eyes gleamed as he started to charge. The gleam died out. That was as far as he got. He could be "a fighting Thaxton" for only a second at a time. He had sagged back to let out a low cry like a puppy's. With muffled snorts and chuckles the Panthers closed in. Splice jerked the old coat, split it up the back.

"Is that a pot-belly?" Splice rammed his fist hard into it and laughed at Mister Lance doubled forward in pain.

"How y'all like the *new* Catch o' Sironia?" Sore Eyes had picked up the old panama and rammed it on his own wiry blonde head. "I gotta fight the wimmen off me!"

"Tellya what — " Splice's thick lips were hanging open, moist, "let's tear his britches off — and chase him down Main — a-waving and a-flopping — like — " Splice had been jerked back by his

collar of plaid gingham so fast he sat down hard. It was by somebody not much taller than he was, somebody all in white with white hair standing out — wild! The sun reflected from Miss Milly's glasses was like burning beams of light. She fairly swarmed over the Panthers — all at the same time, shoving and slapping and even kicking until she came to Tam. She stopped and just looked at *him*. Just *looked* at him. Then she turned to take Mister Lance by the arm. He hadn't stopped that whimpering and pitiful smiling that said it was all a joke, wasn't it? Wasn't that *all* it was?

Splice back on his feet and crazy mad hauled back, would have thrown his half-brickbat at Miss Milly's back disappearing with Mister Lance's up the Hill if Tam hadn't kicked him in the stomach — as hard as he could. He wished it had been harder.

About nine that night Tam was belly-sprawled on the floor. In the glow from the same lamp, Moira was sewing and Marshall was staring at the paper without reading it. Moira caught his eye finally. She nodded down toward Tam. Their boy *seemed* very, very intent on his arithmetic she had been at him all summer to review and never thought he would. The nod said that at last he was growing up, beginning to realize the importance of an education. Marshall glanced down quickly, then more intently. It was all right for Tam to take this sudden interest in his learning, but it didn't seem quite — genuine somehow.

"Reviewed enough for one night?"

"No, sir — this is real interesting!"

Something *was* wrong. Well, whatever else he might lack as a father, he wasn't going to be the kind that *pretended* to know things he didn't to get information out of his son. With a shake of his dark head, he stopped Moira who was about to reach the boy a pillow. He must not be coddled just because he was getting old enough to want to use his head. Already Marshall was feeling the loss of the good-natured, harum-scarum youngster who got into so many scrapes, got pleasure out of everything *not* worthwhile, would go to any length to get around anything that was. The change had to come, he supposed — if the young whippersnapper was to keep out of the penitentiary. But that didn't make it any more welcome to Marshall or, he knew, to Moira. Would Tam be glad he was growing up *if* he knew all it would mean. If he did know, would he be *sure?*

What *was* it that old flamingo, Miss Nathalia, was always harping on in those never-ending "Growing Up with — " articles? "We not only don't really know why we act as we do, but more often than not get most gratification out of things we tell ourselves we disapprove

of most heartily." That kind of talk was all damn foolishness. Maybe, just a *glimmer* of — fact. What the hell now?

A slip of paper was being shoved across the table by Moira: "Don't bother. I'll find out — after you go to bed!!!" At the bottom he scrawled in reply, "Leave him alone!" and shoved it back. A lot of good that would do, now that Moira had taken up the scent. He could only hope now it wasn't too bad, for no matter what it was Moira would be keeping him awake with her crying — and neither of them would mention what it was really about.

She'd never minded about the others so much, why should she about Patsy Garrick? Well, Patsy would soon be a thing of the past. He'd acted the fool for fair.

Once she had looked at him as she had, that Christmas morning going on seven years ago, down near the River, things could go only one way. They probably would have, even had he known her then as he knew her now. She was beautiful and satisfying, also malicious, vindictive and ruthless on occasion. In her way, he supposed, she was generous, devoted, and — yes, in her way, pitiable and —

A polite, warning cough had come from the complete darkness of the back door. A knock on its outside jamb was so light it might not have been heard without the cough to attract attention. Marshall looked at the big clock over the canned-goods shelves. Almost nine. Something wrong at the store — ?

Moira held her work to her and went to the door. "Why, Josie! And another new dress."

"Yas'm." The tall, black woman filled the doorway, well pleased with the dress printed over with big red poppies and green leaves. "Howdy, Mistuh Marshall. Howdy, Tam."

"Howdy!" Tam did not look up. His nose pressed even more closely into the arithmetic book.

Moira looked to Marshall. He turned it away with, "What brings you over this way, Josie? Working all *night*, too?"

"Hyah! Hyah!" Black Josie's laugh made Marshall feel happy. "Seems lak I do. But I sho' oughtn'ter talk like dat. I cleaned house fer Miz Milly today. She ax me whin I got dressed ter leave dis heah by on my way to de lodge meetin'. Hit's uh — "

"Thank you, Josie." Marshall rose and took the yellowed envelope all three Lipscombs would have known anywhere. He began tearing it open.

"Hit's fer Tam, Mistuh Mar— "

"I know it."

"Yassuh." Josie was puzzled.

"Want some of my red roses?" Moira was quick to put in. "They'd look *real* nice with that pretty dress."

"Yas, *ma-am!*"

"Take all you want. I think you can tell by the street light which are prettiest."

Marshall read the note slowly, then took his chair. After looking over on the blank side he read it again. As usual, he paid no attention to the uneasy stare from the floor, the chewing of a cedar pencil which left purple marks on nervous red tongue. He was equally oblivious to Moira doing her best to be oblivious to this exasperating way of his. There was no breaking him of it, not in *this* world!

Ordinarily, Tam would have asked. For once, he'd "a heap ruther" have just sunk through the floor, the world and down into China.

After a hundred years, Pop cleared his throat and leaned a little more into the light. So did Mama. Pop started to read, stopped to wipe his glasses. Tam had stopped breathing. Pop looked down over his specs at Tam and then, like he hated to give up *his* secret, read slowly:

"'Mrs. Calvin Thaxton requests the company of Master Tammas Lipscomb for—'" He looked down again at a completely ossified Tam. "'—Sunday dinner at one o'clock.' Don't say a thing about anybody *else*." Pop was acting real left-out.

"How—how nice, Tammy!" Mama knew Pop wanted it settled Tam would 'accept,' before he had a chance to start excuses. "I'll send a note in the morning saying he'll be—"

"This one don't say a thing about replying."

"More like—an order!"

"Moira! I'll just let it drop at the Store Tam is going out to Thaxtons' for Sunday dinner. It'll get back to her all right."

Were they going to start asking questions? Mama would have already if Pop hadn't been here. If they did, it looked like Tam was going to lie. He didn't want to. It was wrong and—the devil'd get him sure. But if Pop ever found out a Lipscomb had shied even a tee-nincy little, old—pebble at a Thaxton, somebody's butt was going to get blistered. Mama said when you'd done wrong and knew it you ought to *want* to be punished. Tam couldn't see that. How could wearing him out help Mister Lance? He was sorry—sorry as everything—sorry as *hell* he'd let Splice Rogan *make* him do it. They might even've killed Mister Lance—with that brickbat Splice had. And then they'd all been hanged and—"

"What does it *mean*, Tam?"

"What does—what mean, Pop?"

"*Why* is Miss Milly asking you to dinner *by yourself?*" There was the faint suggestion of a laugh from Mama because Pop felt slighted. "I asked you a question, Tam."

Tam shrugged out a mystified "Um-uhh-um!" and then hearking back to one of his baby-sayings, "Because I'm so sweet, I reckon."

"Of course, that's it, Mister Lipscomb. She's always been partial to Tammy. Never fails to stop me in the Store to ask after him. Now that he's growing up she — naturally wants to know him better. And the best way is to — "

"Moira, will you let *me* handle — "

"Are you trying to say, Mister Lipscomb, that people *don't* like your own son, your own flesh and blood? Well, of all the *mean* things I ever heard of! Tell your *loving* father good night, Tammy — er — *long* past your bedtime! He — he didn't *mean* to hurt your little feelings — so don't you mind too much, honey." And all the time she was half lifting him and herding him up to his room overhead, not leaving any space for old Pop to get a word in edgeways.

The Lipscomb home was not the only recipient of an unexpected message that evening. One of the long envelopes with return address of the Sironia Bank (and "T. B., Jr." written above it) had been left at Hazel's cottage. Not by any of the bank niggers, but by Old Cassius from Syringa! Why she hadn't refused to take it, she wasn't sure yet — on this the following morning.

Already dressed for town, it was with no final decision. She jabbed a gilt horned-toad hatpin in slowly disintegrating pheasant-feathered toque. She would leave the envelope at the cashier's window marked "Returned unopened to sender." That'd show Br'er Tom. She knotted torn brown veiling angrily. No — she would read the letter and then just ignore the whole thing. She trimmed the ravelings of dark brown braid on her faded brown coat-suit. She had already sent the Mill word she would be an hour late on account of a little personal business. Never much to be done on Fridays, anyhow, with the girls thinking of nothing but Saturday night dates, not liking the well-chaperoned parties she'd gotten up for them at first.

She put the hateful envelope in her petit point handbag. It was Bill's last gift. The day and everything about it misted over. The bag couldn't last much longer, although for years she had been extra careful with it. Bill wouldn't want his "Old Lady" to act like — like another Millicent Thaxton. She'd write Tom — send it by mail,

Dear sir:

Regretting that I am unable to avail myself of your kind suggestion of the 29th inst., I beg to remain,

Respectfully

HAZEL (MRS. WM. F.) ELLIOTT

— but, first, she'd drop by to see Trina. Not that she would mention

Tom's unmitigated gall in writing her, but just talking about Trina's troubles made her almost resigned to her own.

She crossed rough dirt street with the old-time jerky walk. Her old suit and hat were too heavy but still "blended beautifully" with the faded greens and dull browns of late summer. Cool — for August. If only it wasn't the *wrong* kind of people in the world who lived on — and on!

Trina, she learned, was across the River helping some woman with more children than good sense. She did believe Trina did more such-as-that without being paid a cent than Hazel did on company salary. That wasn't true, of course — but still — "No, thank you, Mammy, wouldn't think of disturbing Miss Nathalia. It's just a *little* matter I wanted to see Miss Trina about. Ask her to run over the first night she can find time — " Mammy knew that meant tonight.

Hazel was annoyed. She had needed this little talk. In a way, it was almost as if Trina had failed her. How silly! She would have to find someone else. Moira would be fine, but not the dust in that part of town from River Road. And it was eight blocks over there, at least.

Undecided, she still didn't saunter, but pegged briskly on up Fifth. She'd rather lose an arm, but she *could* stop by that despisable Nanette's. Hardly anybody did now — except as a form of penance. Listening to her ought to bleach any sin white as snow.

She knocked at the front door of crackled brown varnish. "Co-o-ome!" This was the long-suffering tremolo Nanette used for company. The open door of the middle bedroom released a hot, nauseous breath, despite two washpans on the floor of reddish fluid "for disinfecting the sickroom and freshening the air."

"Oh, it's *you!*" The invalid looked out from a wad of pink blankets and lavender quilting in her wheel chair. In August! "I'd never have guessed it. It's been six months or more since you paid me any mind. I might as well have — "

"No, it hasn't, Nannie. I'm a working woman now — "

"Good excuse as any!" The thin lips twisted nastily. "Sit down. You! (to the teen-age sullen black girl in raveling blue cotton) Get out and don't come back until I call. But mind you come quick when I do. Of all the chuckleheaded fools I've been cursed with since God forsook me, Hazel, this one's the *worst*. Honestly, Hazel, what have I ever done to have the Lord turn his back on me completely — for years — *years!*" No answer was wanted. "What's wrong with *you* — you look more haggard and hatchet-faced every time I see — "

"Maybe, if you'd put your glasses on — "

"God forbid — you look bad enough without 'em!" Her laugh said she was trying to pass what was only too true off as a joke.

Never one to submit placidly, Hazel knew she'd better leave before

she said a few things that somebody ought to have said a long time ago. Nobody had, because they'd do no good whatever. "Looked at *yourself* lately?" *Her* smile showed that was a joke — just like the other. If Nanette heard, she gave no sign.

"If you're working so hard, how'd you get loose to stop by and crow over me this time of day?"

"I'm not crowing over you. I — I've got a little business down in town — was just — passing — "

"Needn't rub it in — I know you wouldn't go out of your way to see me. Nobody does. When I was a girl, fair-weather friends — "

"Shame on you! Trina Hadyn has been *mighty* nice to you."

"Her! Just wants to gloat over the only one she *thinks* is worse off than she is. *One* cross I *don't* have is unfaithfulness. Not that Stacey Lane wouldn't — if he could. As Trina Hadyn just same as said the last time she — "

"Nannie! You're not well. I'm making allowances a mile a minute — but you're not going to speak that way in my presence about Trina. You understand?"

"You wouldn't talk like that if I wasn't too weak to stand up — "

"I wouldn't?"

Squint, mean little eyes flickered. "Yes, I guess *you* would. Everybody says you'll tear into anybody. Maybe, I *was* wrong about Trina. She's been — " it was a great effort for her, " — real nice, considering — "

"That's more like it. Phew! How in all tarnation — " Hazel jumped for a window like a sparrow hawk, managed to get it up. The cool air cut a Red Sea swath through the fetidness. " — do you *live* in an oven like this?"

"O-oh! You're trying to kill me — "

"Better off dead than in this stinking air. Here — I'll pull your precious blankets up around you until you — "

"I won't! I'd rather catch the la grippe and die — so's everybody can know what a friend you — oh, Hazel!"

Malicious dimpled cheek had been slapped hard. "Shut up! Speak before you can talk decently and you'll get another." A scrawny palm was lifted in readiness. "I've got one or two like you — not as bad, of course — in the Mill's commissary. When all else fails, they get — what you just got."

"Fine 'welfare' worker you are!" The effort at sarcasm was weak. "Maybe — I was a little hysterical. The way my family's treated me's — honestly, Hazel, they've broken my heart."

"I doubt it, Nannie. There! The blankets are tucked in all around your feet, too. Want me to stay a little longer or go?"

"Anything's better than being alone with that black — "

"Thanks!" Hazel seated herself. "It won't be long. I—I've got to get on downtown—to the Bank—"

"Pushing you to pay a loan as usual?"

"They've never pushed me—they know when *I* get it *they'll* get it. Whatever it is is none of your business!"

The bundled-up little hawk laughed pleasantly for the first time in weeks. "You've certainly got your own idea of 'bedside manner.' If I didn't know better, I'd say you'd never had any real troubles of your own. Hazel—heard any late news about the *famous* member of the Lane family?"

"No—I haven't—not reliably. Same old things over and over is all."

"You mean about her being run out of the place that French blaggard thief backed with the money he stole from you-all? Served the—the strumpet right. I hope they stripped her and horsewhipped her up one street and down—"

"Well, they didn't. It seems she had enough good friends in the right places to warn her. When the reformers—or whatever they called themselves—got out there, she had been gone several hours. Got all her savings out of New Orleans with her, too! Wherever she went—Tennessee, some say—she's *well* fixed."

"Ain't *that* justice! Here I've been a God-fearing, virtuous woman all my life, and look—"

"There're different kinds of virtue. You got one kind—and Laurine's got *all* the others."

"Are you saying that I'm being punished for being a pure—?"

"God ain't confided in me—but I got my own ideas. Maybe—if you quit hating people and quit pitying yourself for just a *few* minutes a day, He might let up on you some."

"I don't give a damn what He—" She had seen the palm rising again, gagged. "If—I wasn't a helpless invalid, you wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't've come to see you, in the first place. Ready for me to go—now?"

"No, Hazel—don't go. You think you are doing right—and I—I forgive you."

"Save your forgiveness for somebody as wants it. Settle back and be quiet and I'll tell you what they say that Mrs. Milt Temple's been up to lately—with *two* brothers—at the same time."

"No-o! You know how I hate gossip, hate anything indecent, Hazel Elliott. But—"

"I know. But dirty-minded ole Hazel isn't going to *make* you listen to it. There're other things. Shall we talk about the monument Miss Carietta is after the town to erect to some 'illustrious' so-and-so of the Civil—"

"Hazel. Please." She was pleading eagerly. "I heard about that awful Temple — woman trying to get my poor Jed back, but not a word about — "

"Settle back, be a good girl, and I'll tell." Hazel did not try to conceal her justifiable gratification in giving another so much pleasure. It took some time, ended only by "LawsamussyGod — as Charlotte used to say — when I had a Charlotte. I got to get on downtown in a hurry — " She was up, loosing a few pheasant feathers, smoothing the frayed petit point bag with fluttery, bird-bath movements. "Still mad at me?"

"Now, Hazel, don't tease me. I'm a sick woman. When're you coming again? Not until you have to?"

"I don't ever have to. But it won't be long — " She interrupted the little Negress's preoccupied struttings before the hall mirror in Nanette's only presentable hat, then chop-chopped out of the house and on down Aurelia Street.

The first view of the Bank's Doric columns settled things. It did look like she was going to see the old devil after all right at the time he'd set. It certainly *did* look that way. The acrid twist of little mouth ended up a smile: People were funny things. And, little doubt about it, Hazel Elliott was the "funniest" thing of all.

Tom would be in Mister Balcom's office (formerly Calvin Thaxton's), she felt sure. It had a side entrance on Aurelia. She wouldn't have to run the pop-eyed gauntlet of the Bank's five or six clerks. If she were a little taller she could see in the office window easily. There might be someone else there now. No, not when he'd said nine-thirty and it was nine-thirty exactly by the Bank's clock in side window. Tom wouldn't have any doubts about anybody's coming when *he* said come. It'd do him good to have his royal summons ignored. Hardly speaking to her (*she'd* started it) on the street for going-on seventeen years, and now same as commanding her to appear and bow before him! Time he found out there was *one* he couldn't order around like a — like a — She had already opened the mahogany door of stained-glass lettering "Private Entrance," closed it instantly and softly behind her. Just as she had known he would be, he sat at the desk of bank-president Balcom. He knew she had come. Kept toward her was the back of crisply waved, dry-as-dust iron-gray head bowed over some papers before him.

"You don't have to show *me* how busy you are, Br'er Tom."

Thin boniness unfolded upward with all the politeness of its Storrow half. One corded hand started toward her, but, stopped by her tight little face, remained at his side. "Will you take *this* chair, Hazel?" Hmph, it was the only one for her to take!

She sat straighter than its vertical mahogany back. The springed

swivel of the other chair gave a loud creak. "I wouldn't have — written you, if I — a certain matter hadn't come up which no one but you could — that you wouldn't want anyone else to — to — "

"Dispose of?"

"Exactly!" He, too, spoke with asperity. "You realize, of course, that in business — uh — personal feelings must sometimes — go by the board?"

"If I didn't, would I be here?"

"Ahem! You know, I presume, the Bank is mine, although Balcom as its president does all the work. Well — when I — took charge, there were a few matters — pending — matters I didn't feel Balcom, a comparative stranger, should handle. I had had no idea the variety of — services required of bankers. Most of them have been — disposed of confidentially and, I hope, satisfactorily. Left is this one I don't feel I should act on without authority from you. You didn't know that I liked Bill Elliott, I don't suppose."

"Let's leave out all unnecessary personal — "

"My liking Bill *is* necessary!" When no reply came, he began again: With all the legal procedure out of the way, and the Bank running smoothly under Balcom, he had had time to go through the large metal box (once a cigar humidor) in the vault marked "Calvin Reardon Thaxton, President — Confidential Bank Matters." It was unlocked by one of the bunch of keys Miss Milly had turned over to him. The bottom parcel, in heavy brown paper, had had banded to it a wired tag.

This tag he now extended to Hazel. She took it, jerkily adjusted nose-glasses from her handbag and read:

> 11-29-1900
> Should Calvin Reardon Thaxton pre-decease William (Bill) Elliott, this package is to be returned to said Elliott intact and unopened.

She read it again then laid it on the extended desk leaf, looked at him in silence.

"The parcel, itself — " he bent to the right and fitted another key into a bottom drawer and lifted out a package about the size of a large brick, " — is not one to be left — lying around. It contains, I estimate, some two hundred or more ten-dollar bills. I opened only this corner." He turned it over to show. Unbroken wax had been imprinted with Calvin's well-known Achilles'-head seal ring.

She nodded with an audible catch in her breathing. "You've known this — over six years. Why have you waited, Br'er Tom?"

"Bank's duties often prove — awkward. They try to get *all* possible information before — acting. Sometimes such as this raise more ques-

tions than they answer. If put in his estate, his creditors would have taken it. I didn't know if they — should. Searching old ledger sheets showed that Bill withdrew the two thousand that same day, November 29, 1900 — but the canceled check must have been returned to him long ago. I — don't think *this* check would have borne any notation, anyway — "

"And, why — may I ask?" Like a fighting cock she was, ready to leap at him.

"This!" He opened a dingy little red leather book where a scrap of paper had been inserted. "Mrs. Thaxton was for years unable to make herself go through her husband's personal effects. She did so yesterday only to get something for Lance — his father's garnet scarf pin, I believe. She came across this little book, saw that it had to do with the Bank's business and sent it to me. It will help clear up a number of things. *That* is why I waited until today."

If he had expected her to snatch the book as she quite likely would have once, he was disappointed. She waited grimly as he resumed. The Bank (meaning himself) knew now that the money was not for any *legal* obligation, as might have been the case. Legally, if she wished, it could be arranged for her to sign a receipt for it — and that would be about all there was to it. She didn't have to read the notation in the red book. On the other hand, she certainly had the right to —

She took the book without hesitation, and squinted over the faded penciling, adjusted her glasses.

> 11/29/1900: X acknowledged Y — left 2M cash to be used to help as I see fit, if X dies with money still in my possession. Any of 2M not used by Y's twenty-first birthday (Jan. 17, 1916) is to be turned over to him with whatever explanation to me seems best.

Suddenly the resemblance between the two mummy-like figures, one only about three fourths as tall as the other, was marked.

"You know *who* 'Y' is, Br'er Tom?"

"There was only one birth recorded here January 17, 1895. I had heard 'talk,' too. However, don't you think you should decide what you want to do *without* that information? Had Bill known how you would be left — financially, I am sure he would want this money to go to you. On the other hand, there is this evidence of its original purpose. If it had not been so set aside it would have been — lost with the rest. *You* should make the decision, now that *you've* paid off his debts. The Bank, I believe, can consider these bills part of Bill's estate, long since closed and, with a few legal preliminaries, take your receipt for them. As to your last question — I have all the information here about — 'Y.' Do you want to see it?"

"Certainly!" She laid her bag, right side up, carefully on his desk, and adjusting her glasses took up the sheet of data. He pretended to be deep in the pile of letters before him.

Midway the precise summary, all processes of her mind stopped. She could seem to read on, did seem to, but she had taken in nothing since that name. Somewhere the past that was in her own mind was doing more to dovetail facts than all the investigating Tom had done. She would not, did not make a sound, not a move except to keep her eyes reading left to right, left to right —

The last word had been absorbed. The sheet was laid on his desk beside her bag. She wanted to rise, snort "Rubbish!" and stride out. She was afraid to try to — yet. The result might be — ridiculous. If she waited a moment — in "deep thought" —

"You've finished. Any questions?"

"No — yes, there is. Anyone else know — about this money?"

"No. You are finding it hard to believe I can be considerate?"

"I quit being surprised at you a long time ago, Br'er Tom."

"Thank you." The dry smile was as perfunctory as his words. "If you had got into desperate straits — financially, I think I might have surprised you. Might still, if — ?"

"Don't be a jackass! You know perfectly well with what the Mill pays me and the Florida bonds windfall I need no help, now. Wish you had given — 'Y' the money and left me out of it."

"Do you, Hazel?"

"I said so, didn't — I don't know. I — I've got to be getting on over to the Mill."

He rose with her. "Take your time. The package will be held here — in your name." His eyes were on her with almost lipless half-smile.

"Enjoying the — the fix you've put me in, Br'er Tom?"

"Naturally."

"Remember, Tammykins," Moira was pecking at him, spreading the loops and ends of navy Windsor tie, tucking the tail of white shirt into blue wash pants, "bee-have yourself!" She looked to be sure Pop was out of earshot over in the big room. "And notice things more. Land o' Goshen! I just let these pants out last week and now you've growed so — down there."

"You mean my big butt?"

"Tammas Lipscomb!" She shook him roughly for Pop's benefit. "Don't you never let me hear you say that — them words again — never!" Then as soon as Pop had ambled on out the front door, while waiting for Sunday dinner, she winked and nodded her dark head.

They both got the snickers. He and Mama had secrets, a million secrets, anyway!

"What *we* having for dinner?"

"Never you mind, Mister So-ciety Man. You ain't eating *here*—"

"Please,—I—I bet it won't be near as good—up yonder. Te-ell me—"

"I won't do no such thing, but—there might be some of everything left, and *if* there is, there might—just possible—be some of everything kept for your supper!"

"Koo-koo-ka-roo-oo!" he crowed shrilly. "I'm goner have *two* Sunday dinners!"

"You won't, young rooster—" Pop had wandered back in, trying not to show how he felt about Tam's first appearance alone—with people that counted, "—if you don't get a move on you. Moira—hasn't he got a *boy*-tie instead of that dratted thing?"

"I won't wear no sissy tie!" Tam had jerked one end of blue silk hard enough to remove the whole tie. "I don't want to go, nohow. I'd heap ruther stay—"

"Shut your mouth, Tam Lipscomb! Now—see what you've done, Mister Lipscomb. Complaining one minute he's late and then undoing all I done to get him ready." All the time she was going through Tam's dresser drawer, the bottom one. She came up with a black, already-tied bow tie whose wires hooked on over a collar button. "Does this suit you two experts? Tam, every once in a while you feel to see if this thing is still on straight."

"Yes'm. Pop, is this a boy-tie?"

"Yes, son. I want you to—make us proud of you today—the way you act."

"Ye-es, sir." He hadn't sounded any too sure. Reckon Miss Milly was inviting him to get him by himself so she could wear him out? Splice had said that's what he'd bet it was. He had even suggested that the rest of the Panthers "be around" to come to Tam's resser-cue. Tam knew Pop'd rather Miss Milly'd kill him than have the Panthers cause more trouble. "I—I don't feel ver-ry well, Mama. Maybe, I better not go. You could send a note to Miss—"

"None of that! You're ready—and off you go. Mister Lipscomb, I think you'd better walk far's North Thaxton *with* him. See him *in* the door!" She looked meaningly. Pop agreed it was better, as anxious as he'd been to eat. He got his straw hat, but did not bother to put on the coat to yesterday's wilted linen pants.

They started down Second. Mama was trailing along, adjusting the rubber band which held turned-up straw hat on round head.

The minute she turned back, he looked up at Pop. Their eyes met and were in full agreement as Tam removed the "babyish" straw

sailor, tucked the elastic which had been tight under his chin up inside it and replaced the hat at the angle Mister Jed used for his.

It was a real nice day, too nice to be all hog-tied by company clothes and wondering what might be going to happen. It would sure be fine at the swimming hole where all the Panthers but him were going right after dinner. "Look, Pop! Wonder where Jared's going to right at dinnertime."

"Taking Mammy something over to Hadyns', I expect. Hello, Jared."

"Hello, Mister Lipscomb and Tam — Mistuh Tam."

Tam flushed painfully. "Got some new gray pants, ain't you? They look — good, Jared."

"Dey wuz sont ovah — by Miz Hazel — "

"By Miss Hazel!" Pop grunted. "She's — a mighty fine lady."

"Ye-es suh! She done sont wuhd she want me to he'p her wid dinnuh."

"Probably having company."

"Prob'ly," Jared agreed politely, waited cap in hand until the Lipscombs had moved off.

"Pop — *Pop!*"

"Sorry, Tam — I was — daydreaming. Another name for laziness. What'd you say?"

"Nothing yet." He was panting to keep up with unintentionally increased pace. "I wanted to ask if they ain't some way I can — play with Jared — like I used to."

Marshall put a hand on the little shoulder farther from him, drew hot little body next his hip as they walked. "I wish there was, Tam. Jared's a good little nigger and a good influence on you — "

"He sholy is!" Tam was hopeful. "He's the bestest infloo-ence on me they is!"

" — but it's just how things are. You didn't make them this way and Pop didn't, either."

"Did Miss Carietta?"

Marshall laughed in booming relief. They had gone past Lee Street before he replied. "No — not this time. But I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't somebody — a long, long time ago — like her."

"I *hate* her!"

"You don't even know her. Don't ever say you hate people — or things — just because you hear somebody else say *they* do."

"Not even you and Mama?"

"Not even us. Make up your own mind. And, Tam, don't ever let yourself — *not* like people just because they don't like you. Remember they're pretty apt to have a good reason. It's better to find out what's wrong with *you*, and change it."

"Ye-es, Pop!"

"You haven't understood a word—but don't bother about it—yet. And don't bother about Jared, either. He'll be lonesome for a little while for the—Panthers. But he'll soon find friends of his own—color, and be happier for it."

"Like them good as he does us? He *couldn't*—"

"There are lots of boys in the world as likable as the Panthers. And some a *lot* better behaved!"

"Pop, you ain't goner tell me *again* I oughter be like Charley Storrow—?"

"You know his mother wants him called 'Charles.' That why you called him Charley?"

Tam beamed up, widely, delightedly. Marshall turned his face away. "I didn't—mention it before—but when his mother was in the store yesterday she said she wanted you to come over and play with Charles some afternoon real soon—"

"I'll take the Panthers along. When we get *through* with *him*, he'll—"

"You will not! Who knows? Charles might get to be your best friend."

"Jared's the only 'best friend' I want." He choked a little.

"I—know, son. The truest friend I ever had, I reckon, was a Negro boy like Jared, only he was all-black. When we were ten years old he got drowned in the old swimming hole—"

"That why you always warning me to be careful?"

"One reason. I never got over it, although it's been forty years ago or better. What I mean to say," they were barely moving now, "is that—in one way—I'm glad it happened, because this way he and I are friends—still. But not if he had lived—"

"Why-y not?"

"It just don't—work out right. In one of her *Sentinel* articles, Miss Nathalia said something I think about often." Marshall pulled out the thin-washed tail of Tam's white shirt. "See—part of the threads go this way—and the others run crossways."

"That's because it's wove!" Tam explained half proud, and half injured Pop didn't know what the Panthers had learned in school last year. "They's the warp and the woof."

"That's right. They're what make cloth—cloth. Make it hold together and—be usable—be like it ought to be. What would happen if some of the warp threads were to get mixed up and start going the woofs' way?"

"They'd get a-all tangled and—" Tam was suddenly hopeful he'd be there to see the mess, "—and ever'thing!"

"'A-all tangled and ev'ything'—nobody could've said it better. And

it'd be jus' as bad for the warps as for the woofs, wouldn't it?"

"I — I guess so.'

"Well, anyhow, — Miss Nathalia said that — in Sironia, anyway, — white folks and black folks are like those two kinds of threads. Each is meant to go his own way and when they do, together, they help each other make Sironia what it is. When one of them gets crosswise, it's bad for all."

"Niggers ain't near as good as white, Splice says."

"The Bible says all men are created equal — "

"No, The Declaration of Independence does!"

"Are you correcting your father?"

"No, sir. I was just — "

"Well, you should have. I was wrong. That's not in the Bible — not *just* that way. Men may be *created* equal — but they sure don't stay equal. So — until we can *know,* remember that, maybe, white people ain't so all-fired much *better* as they think they are."

"Did Miss Nathalia say that, too?"

"No. *I* put that in."

"Then — Jared and me can — "

"No, son."

"You think it's bad for Jared and me to — "

"Not bad — just not suitable — in Sironia."

"I — I hate Sironia and — "

"Tam! A man worth his salt never hates his home. Sironia is yours. Always will be, I expect."

Tam trudged on, rebellion in the force expended in kicking rocks with newly shined black shoes.

"This's far as I go." Marshall stopped by familiar iron pickets. "Tuck in your shirttail — and lower lip. I'll be watching until you get *inside.*"

"Y-yes, sir."

Tam opened the side gate and walked, rather kicked his way reluctantly on up the rise and around to the front of the house. Mama had said Thaxton Hill needed to be done all over. Repairs were needed to cracked window-glass and crackled, curling old paint. The crape myrtles looked starved. Even the grass which Mister Lance enjoyed mowing was tall and falling over. He'd busted his prized lawn mower over an iron foot-scraper while watching a jay-bird chase a sparrow out of its nest.

As he mounted the wide low steps, Tam took a last look at the world. No telling what would've happened to him by the time he got loose again. He stretched on tiptoe to thump the black iron hand holding the black iron ball. The heavy tread of bare feet coming along the carpeted floor inside couldn't be Miss Milly. He flattened his nose against one of the side lights. It was Black Josie. In her white dress

and blue bandanna she looked ten feet tall. As she opened the door, her grin looked ten feet wide.

"Well, if hit ain't *Mister* Lipscomb, hisse'f!" She dropped a curtsey twice as low as usual, and then took, almost pried, his straw hat from his head and smoothed his hair. "Come dis heah way, *Mister* Lipscomb." She motioned through the open doors to the front parlor, the only open door in the hall. "Have yo'se'f a seat, suh." Josie was enjoying herself and Tam was, too. "Miz Milly'll be in 'fo' long. Is you puffecly com-fer-tibble?"

"Yes — thank you, Josie."

Another wide grin took a whole lot of his uneasiness away with it. Healthy Negro smell vanished, too. He was alone in now familiar mustiness with its faded yellows and blues, left with its creaky house-noises and thin-worn carpet. If it hadn't been for the bright sun outside and Josie, this old room would be kind of — spooky.

She came in — smoothly, for all the rustling of buttoned-down-the-front white. Her parted and crimped hair looked whiter and she really was thinner — just since Thursday. She was smiling, and that helped, as did the small pink tea rose just behind and below one small ear. Why, Miss Milly was — pretty!

"Glad to see you, Tam." She took the hand he hadn't realized he had shoved stiffly out in thin, cool ones. They had just been washed, he could feel. He saw the blue veins along the back of one and on the inner wrist of the other. She was drawing him toward one of the floor-to-ceiling windows opening on wide front veranda. She stooped suddenly, her face level with Tam's. Out between two of the front buttons on her white dress a tiny heart-locket dangled loosely into view.

"Wh-what's that?"

"What, honey? Oh!" It was her getting so flustered that made him remember, years afterward, and all over nothing but a teency-weency little agate heart, hung on a gold neck chain so thin you might look right at it and not see it. "Just one of Miss Milly's thousand-and-one little — trinkets. Tam, dear — " She was really whispering now. "Launcelot, Mister Lance, will be down in a minute. We — you and I — are not going to mention — the other day before him, are we?"

"No, ma'am!"

She kissed his forehead so lightly he wasn't sure she had. "I know you took part in that — little game only because you didn't have time to think. Tam, he's different from most men *we* know. But he — he's *not* like some of the boys — in fun, of course — seem to think — " Her voice kept steady, but the hands tightening about his were colder. "He just — just likes to be to himself more — to think. You will — " she looked back like she was scared, "you will see that the other boys treat him — respectfully, won't you?"

"Yes'm, I will. I'm awful sorry 'bout what we done."

"Of course, you are. I was right about you being a little *man*. And now—" Miss Milly was looking at him differently, in a way he never forgot, "—now *we* won't even have to mention the matter to your father. Want to see Mister Lance's workshop? He's about finished a new martin-box to go in the lilacs out by the old summerhouse." She moved a tall wisteria screen revealing the broken lawn mower and a lot of tools—and wood shavings. Tam forgot all discomfort in examining the bird house. It had four small colonial columns and a veranda and even a little railed "observatory" room up on top.

"It'll be nicer—when it's painted." The soft voice seemed to come from nowhere.

Tam looked back uncertainly. He needn't have bothered. If Mister Lance remembered the rocking, he gave no sign. "You like it, Tam?"

"Oh, yes, I do. Wish *I* had one—"

"I'll give you this one—when I get it finished—"

"No, Launcelot, Tam didn't mean that. Tam, he'd give everything he has away if I'd let him. You boys stay here while I see how Josie is getting along—in by the day only, she forgets where every blessed thing is. But so do I!"

They got along together fine, no two ways about it. Even if he couldn't use his hands to fight, Mister Lance (if you let him take his time) could sure use them to make things. And he was *real* good company. When there was nothing to get him excited he talked as sensible and good as anybody almost. Part of the Baptist evangelist's sermon last Sunday came back to Tam: it had been on "If there'd never been any private property in the world." And Pop had said on the way home, "If there'd never been any private property in the world, Moira, I calculate we'd all be a sight more like Lance Thaxton than he'd be like us."

Black Josie began bringing in covered dishes. She'd put them on the mahogany table in a rear corner of the combined back parlor and dining room and go back for more. On the white cloth already were the Thaxton silver and Thaxton china Mama had told him to expect. Some of it was a little cracked, and a pewter bowl of late blue and pink larkspur was in the middle. Tam's interest in the bird house lessened. As bad-mannered as he knew it was, curious eyes kept cutting toward the table.

"May I interrupt you distinguished scientists," Miss Milly was asking now, "long enough to eat?"

"Yes'm!" from Tam.

"In just a few minutes, Mo—other."

"*Now*, dear!"

At the love and pride in her voice, he laid down his new chisel and

affectionately took Tam's hand to lead him the ten feet to the table. Mister Lance took the wrong chair and had to move. Tam was interested mostly in what was on the table. There was good-smelling fried chicken, the kind that crackled between his teeth. Hominy grits had *real* thick light brown gravy. That dish was carrots all chopped up and mixed with late garden peas. Flaky white biscuit and two — no, three kinds of homemade pickles — or, maybe, preserves, and —

"Bow your heads, boys. Our Father, for this food and for thy countless other blessings make us truly, humbly thankful. For Christ's sake. Amen." She looked to her left. "This is your napkin, Tam. I do hope you like fried chicken — "

"Oh, yes'm. Mama says I'd eat the feet if she'd let me — only my favorite piece is — Golly! I mean I like just — just whatever piece you want me to have."

Miss Milly smiled. "But the piece you like best is the drumstick. No? The second joint. No? The wishbone? *So,* that's it! Well, you shall have it — for your *first* piece — just as soon as I get the gentleman on my right helped. He's older, you know." She raised one of the pink and gold plates of the three stacked before her. "Launcelot, dear, may I help you to some chicken? There! Some of the grits? That enough, dear?" She didn't wait, just helped his plate while she asked. Once she paused to smile at Tam's eyes impatiently following every movement of food.

He blushed, tried to cover up. "I was just thinking — Josie's sholy good at cooking."

And Mister Lance took it up — more to himself than to anybody else, "Yes, Josie is sholy good at — cooking!" At this, the huge black frame exploded into a series of hyah-hyah-hyah's, had to run out of the room. Even knowing the blessing-out she'd get later, she couldn't stop laughing. Tam got tickled, too.

"Well!" Miss Milly sat up. "I do declare! In the few months Josie's been working out for others she has lost every lick of manners she ever had. A *good* girl, but — I'll get Mammy to straighten her out. And as for this mischievous son of mine, what he needs is a wife who'll take him in hand, make him quit joking at mealtimes — Why, Tam, dear, you've slid almost out of your chair under the table — oh! Go on, dear, laugh if you want to. It was funny, — wasn't it?" She hadn't cracked a smile. "And now," she drew nearer to her the steaming dish of mixed peas and fine-chopped carrots, "May I help you to the carrots and peas, Launcelot?"

He hesitated. Wrinkles in fine brow showed the struggle for decision behind it. Then it cleared. "I'll thank you kindly for some of the peas, Mo-other, but I don't care for any of the carrots!"

As Tam was being ushered into the front parlor of Thaxton Manor, Jared entered an alley gate over near Hadyn Hill. About all there was in its back yard were dead grass, dead fruit trees, three old sheds of lumber-mill junk that "might be needed sometime" and what was left of an unsuccessful summer-vegetable garden. All were "wore-out"-looking, like the small home itself. Its lower part was as lost in dusty, untrimmed evergreens as that place Miss Nathalia used to live in.

Jared shifted uneasily on the back stoop without knocking, a slender youth in clean, raveling white shirt and clean, faded overalls. White-blue eyes stood out oddly in mulatto face. Slightly fuzzy hair was reddish gold only in the sun. All Miss Hazel's note to Mammy had said was for him to be here "before one o'clock to help out." Nobody came to the door.

Doubtfully he took an old broom worn at a rounded angle, and began sweeping the stoop. This was bound to be heard inside. She couldn't say he'd interrupted her by knocking, and she sure couldn't say he was late. He was pleased with his own solution.

"I think you've swept enough now, Jared." She was inside the opened back door, smiling, pert as a sparrow. "Here — take these pans of rolls. Reckon you can carry 'em both at the same time."

"Yes'm. Easy!"

"Well, take the un-baked one over to the Hadyns' and — the *baked* one to Mrs. Lane. Know where she lives?"

"Yes'm. I *knows* Mister Lane an' I'se seed Miz Lane — settin' at her winder."

Severely she searched alert, earnest face and large, light eyes, then looked away quickly. "Don't be in too big a hurry — might drop something. Tell 'em both they're my *new* butterhorn recipe — "

"Yes'm."

"And I hope they enjoy them — "

"Yes'm."

"And no hurry at all about returning the pans — "

"No'm, no hurry — "

"And — they aren't very good — this time — "

"Yes'm."

"Now — what you going to tell 'em?"

"I'm going ter Hadyns' — 'cross de street — to de back doah. I'm goner knock — and hand dis heah one to whoevah answers hit an' say — an' say dey's yo' new respy called butterhorns, you hopes dey likes 'em an' not ter hurry 'bout returnin' de pan — an' dey ain't as good as you kin make — an' — an' dat's all!" He looked up at her. "Less'n you wants to say you hopes dey's well an' — ?"

"That's a good idea. Get back here as soon's you can — *without* hurrying."

"Yes'm." He moved off like a tight-wire performer balancing himself with pans. Hazel watched him through a front window as he felt his way across Fourth Street and began ascending the Hadyn Hill's rear slope. The hair — the way he had bitten a mouth-corner trying to remember her instructions — the absence of motion in flat, compact little hips when he walked, these things couldn't be coincidence, nor her imagination. There wasn't any doubt, if ever there had been —

Back again briefly was the agony of recent nights. But none of that first bitterness. She was ashamed of it now. Bill had been Bill and her decision had been made. She needed help, but she knew where to go. Hazel's Lord was a very personal one. He marked not only each sparrow's fall but the weaknesses and strengths and struggles of those even *more* irresponsible — humans. What contempt He must have for a Nanette Lane to let life punish her so! What love and admiration for Trina — and Laurine Lane!

Where she could no longer weep for herself, Hazel now hid her face, tears pushing through corded claw-fingers. Trina! How blind Hazel had been this last month not to understand the heightened natural color in those thin, freckled cheeks, the strange, cheery ebullience so foreign to shy nature — the way she had caught Hazel's eye — several times — as if pulling a question from her. Just yesterday it was that Hazel had laughed at one of the girl's new and trifling enthusiasms. "Trina, whatever has gotten into you? If I didn't know better, I'd swear you're pregnant!"

"About time you did — I *am!* And, oh, Hazel, you're the only one I'm going to tell — until I have to. If he knew, Jed would — wouldn't let me, would make me have an — "

"But, Trina, you promised me you'd be careful."

"I was *very* careful." What was it that told so much more? The emphasis, the steady gaze that went with it? "I was careful — to get exactly what I meant all along to give Jed. I'll tell you how someday." Hazel could actually feel the happy, happy girl again in her arms rejoice with her —

As so often now, she put this, too, out of mind — was pleased with her new accomplishment. She'd learned not to think thoughts when she didn't have time or didn't want to.

She put a third pan of butterhorns in the oven, basted the small pork roast, and lifted the tops of the iron skillets keeping the corn, squash and sweet potatoes moist and warm. The small table she ate on was slid nearer the open back door, spread with red-and-white-checked cloth and then set with one "place."

Jared returned almost running. Both pans were empty. "Miz Trina insist on retuhnin' her'n an' I didn' give dat Miz Lane de chance not ter. Mammy say she don' nevuh return *nothin'*."

"Oh, Jared! What did you say?"

"I tole de no-'count gal she got wukkin' fer her — de onliest kind she kin git — you was givin' 'er de rolls but *not* de pan, ter give it back ter me. If I had'n', you wouldn' *nevuh* — "

"Maybe not — but I'm afraid Mrs. Lane won't like it — "

"No'm. I heered her back in de house tellin' her nuss dey was prob'ly some ole rolls you was goner throw to de hawgs, anyway — "

"Well! Of all the — " Hazel barely checked soaring temper. "Mrs. Lane isn't well, Jared. Now you run get me some ice for the freezer from the nearest place open today — here's a nickel."

"Yes'm." Off he ran. Smart as a whip — if *only* he were all white — But none of that! Briskly she got at serving the rice-and-pecan dressing for the roast already scenting the whole house. Actually — her spirits were lighter than at any time *since* —

"Got it de ve'y fust place I went to!" Jared opened the top of the refrigerator and lowered the twenty-five-pound block of ice whose manila cord had been cutting into first one almost white palm and then the other. "I foun' dis heah sack out back. Wheah at's de salt?"

"In that brown bag by the freezer — behind the stove. Put the ice in the bag and get the axe to pound — "

"Yes'm, I knows. Kin I have some hot water to wash out de freezuh?"

"There — in the kettle." Even the cocky, self-assured way the child went about doing things was the same.

Working constantly, they had the cream frozen and dinner ready fifteen minutes earlier than she had planned.

"I waits on table goo-ood, Mammy say."

"I don't — think that's necessary, Jared — " She'd almost added "honey." Would have to watch out.

"Well'm, I'll be out back — 'til you needs me."

"No — I may want to — to send you on another errand. I'll help your plate now, and you can sit in the back door there and eat while I do — to save time," she finished doggedly.

"Yes'm." Light eyes lost some of their old man's seriousness, blinked with a baby's delight at not having to wait.

He held the tin plate while she crowded it with two thick slices of pork, a pile of steaming dressing, one each of June corn and squash and another of sweet potatoes, glazed over with syrup. She split two of the butterhorns and ladled them with thick white gravy. "Don't drop it, Jared."

"No, ma'am! Mammy says I'se de carefullest cullud chile she knows."

Heart tightness spun her away from him: Bill's son having to learn he was a Negro. "That's fine — can't be too careful," she said huskily but so abruptly there was sudden surprise in almost albino eyes. "I mean — sit down, child, and eat!"

He was not more than six feet from her chair. For a time there was only the low simmer of the wash-water on the stove and an impatient cluck from four over-old and badly spoiled hens gathered to discuss Jared's bare feet sticking out over the back steps. Hazel watched his interest divide between his plate and the boldest of the hens plainly considering pecking at the nearest big toe. The way he held his plate, used his fork backwards — She was imagining things —

"Shoo them away, Jared. I've got them so used to scraps to keep me company whenever I eat, they're a nuisance. They know I can't bear to eat Miss Carietta, Miss Moira, Miss Nathalia and — me!"

"I bet dat un dat stays off to herse'f is — " delightedly he looked up for confirmation, " — is Miz Ca'ietta!"

Miss Hazel laughed heartily, as she so often had years before. "Now, Jared!"

He got down a big mouthful. "What's dis heah un's name dat's aimin' ter peck my toe soon's I look away — Miz Lane?"

Hazel's thinness actually shook. "No. But I'm going to change her name — 'Miz Lane' fits her better." She felt the glow of child delight in her own flat breast.

"Who's dis heah un?" He was making polite conversation.

"Never mind — now. Do you like going to school?"

"Sometimes I does, an' sometimes I doesn't — but mos'ly I does, I guess. I don't exac'ly *enn*-joy it — not all de time. But I wouldn' wanter quit and grow up like a lot o' shif'less niggers 'roun' heah — "

"Mammy's raising you right, I see. How is the nig — colored children's school going to be this yeah?"

"All right — if it ain't too crowded. But hit's bettuh dan las' year. Dis yeah in de third grade I gits to set at a desk fer *all* my ressytashuns."

"Where did you — 'set' last year?"

"Mos'ly on de floah. But I didn' mind. When de lesson stahts — I forgets whether I'se a-settin' or a-standin', anyway, de teacher say."

"I hope you can keep on. If you do, you might get a chance to go to — But never mind. Get me a cool glass of water from the cistern pump."

He set his plate on the top step, looked suspiciously at "Miz Ca'ietta," threw her a bit of dressing and then put his plate on the floor inside the screen door. He took Miss Hazel's glass. He pumped the old four-foot handle up and down, delivered the glass full, and retrieved his plate. "Fine weather we's havin' fer dis time o' year — "

"Now, Jared — let's not make comp'ny talk. Eat your dinner while it's hot — " Was it the boy — or general lonesomeness — or something else that was making this her most pleasant Sunday in years? Sundays with Bill had been happy and exasperating by turns. This one was pleasant while it was going on. Suddenly, a little ashamedly, she

was wishing with all her old fierceness that Jared didn't have to grow up, could stay with her always — just like this.

"Want a second helping of anything?"

"Oh, no'm." He smiled from the freezer to her and looked down, embarrassed at his boldness.

"No wonder!" She got up and for the first time revealed the white-iced cake behind the safe's tin doors punctured in floral designs. She cut two spongy, yellow slices and put them on a plate picturing a lot of men in a boat, one of them standing recklessly as if he didn't care if it did turn over in all that ice. "Know who that is?"

"Yes'm. Hit's de fath-uh of our country!" He looked up at her and jumped to his feet. "Mammy said not to say '*ouah*' country befo' Miz Ca'ietta. Is it all right befo' *you?*"

"Of course!" She opened the freezer. "It's everybody's country that's born here — even if it may not seem that way — sometimes. Don't let those times keep you from believing and *knowing* it is."

"You talk jus' like Mam — I mean Mammy talks jus' like you, Miz Hazel. Jus' yistiddy — "

"Sit down and eat your dessert, Jared." She handed him a large saucer of frozen custard, rich yellow holding the shape of the spoon.

There was talk of a sort while they washed the dishes and put them away in the kitchen safe. It was not the same kind of talk, not pleasant, not "easy-like."

"Dat de las' one, Miz Hazel. Want me to rake up dem leaves in de front befo' dey blows all ovah — ?"

"Not on Sunday, Jared. There's nothing else — No, don't go yet." He had bowed his best bow and started out the door. "Sit back down on the step there — a minute."

He squatted, his wondering eyes never leaving hers. She started to sit, and then stood leaning lightly against the red and white cloth. "Tam's mother was telling me, Jared, how much they — they all hated having to — make changes — in the Panther Club — "

Reddish-kinky little head tucked quivering chin suddenly in the open v of clean, raveling white.

"It wasn't because they wanted to, Jared."

"I — I — I don' mind. I kin find plenty others ter play wid." Head went up. He did not look her way. "I didn' like — Mister Splice — no way."

"I'm proud of you, taking it this way. There're a lot of things — boys don't understand — and — " she had almost added there were a lot of things grownups didn't either, even if they pretended or even thought they did. "Tam and the others you do like, they still like you, too — just can't show it so plain. If you ever need Tam, you'll see!"

"Reckon I knows dat a'ready, Miz Hazel!" A bright smile broke through the settled gloom about small mouth. "I — I jus' now thought up who *dat* ole hen is named fer — "

"Not today, Jared. You run on home now — tell Mammy you're to come help me every day after school that your lessons will *let* you — and half-day Saturdays and Sundays. I'll pay you a dollar a week — "

"A whole dollar jus' fer dat — gollee! Scuse me — "

"That's all right — and, Jared, you've got a friend you didn't have before. I'm your friend, Jared."

"How you mean, Miz Hazel?"

"I don't know — exactly. Now get on home — skeedaddle!"

Left alone, neither knew what to say, much less what to do. Both tried to look busy, Tam with a loose suspender button and Charles with the way the September sun of early afternoon shone into and out of his new agate taw. They walked down behind Storrow Hill's stables through Miss Carietta's weedy, un-pruned "sunken garden" on the rear slope. The old pecan grove was ahead of them, along what would be Sixth Street if there had ever been any need to number streets that far south.

Between the boys there was contrast on almost every count. One round, flushed face blazoned every thought — including mystification as to why he'd been invited over. No obligations and no worries. From the top of Charles's curly, very fair head and maturely thin features to his smaller than average feet, he was what his people termed "patrician." Tam wore the best navy broadcloth suiting Lipscomb's offered. Moira had won the point over Marshall who had contended such a suit was not for a youngster. And he had shoes on — in September! Charles's white shirt was very clean but slightly worn about the neckband and his overalls were probably the newest and most brilliantly blue overalls ever seen in Sironia. (Moira had dressed Tam up "within an inch of his life" to play with a Storrow; and Miss Carietta had dressed her son "down" to where, she thought, Tam would feel at home.)

"I got me a new taw, too — something like that one."

"This is a *real* agate — is yours?"

"I don't — know. No, it's not — smarty."

"Smarty yourself. Dressed up — like that, showing off."

"I am not. I don't like this suit — don't like *you*, either."

"I don't care. And if you weren't my company, I'd tell you I don't like *you!*"

The round face was redder and shinier. "Know what *you* need?

No, I — I promised not to. But I didn't promise how long I'd stay. I'm going home." He started back up the hill, doggedly, stocky buttocks shifting inside tight dark blue determinedly.

"Tam! Wait — a minute."

"Ordering me around! Splice said you — "

"No. I'm — *inviting* you."

"Well, all right — for just a minute — " He came back to meet Charles in the big spread of pecan shade. "What you want?"

"Mother told me — I got to learn to get along with other boys — and if you go home so soon, she'll talk — talk — talk all night long. And I'll have to start all over again — with somebody else I don't like any bettern'n I do you, so — " the bright blue eyes were swimming with tears, " — if you'll stay, I'll play the way *you* want to. But only because you're my company."

"We-ell, I don't know. I got a lot of other things I'd a heap ruther be doing."

"Wh-at?" in sudden, racking envy.

"Oh — lots of things. You don't expect me to tell just *any*body my business, do you?"

"No — I reckon not. I was just wondering what-all you and Spuds and Johnny Cade and the others do. You — can't tell — ?"

This was much to Tam's liking. "Well, some things, maybe. I got to see what kinda feller you are. Splice says you're a sissy — but, maybe not. What kind of playing can you do?"

Charles was shaking with excitement. "Want me to show you?"

"Aw — I guess so."

"Come on." Charles ran down to the rim of the grassy bank which dropped about fifteen feet to what was always a creek during the spring and fall rains. Now the bend around three sides of the high bank was dry. "This is Vicksburg — "

"*What* is?"

"Here where we are. Down there's the Mississippi. And all over there on the low bank are the Yankees under Ole 'Lys Grant. Right there the Yazoo River comes into — "

"I don't see no Yazoo!"

"You got to imagine *some*thing. I'll be General Pemberton."

This *might* turn into a good game. Already Tam could see the tents of the Yankees showing up all over the lowlands — guns and horses and marching troops, too. "Who'm I?"

"Ole 'Lys Grant."

It had happened again. But Tam had learned how to handle it by now. Squarely in front of Charles, he glowered a moment in silence. "How come?"

"Because your old granddaddy was a Yankee — that's how come."

"That's what I thought you meant — " With a foot behind the

other's ankles and a quick push he toppled Charles to the dead turf and jumped on him, fists flailing and thudding on face and chest in a way of fighting Charles's various tutors had never demonstrated. "Take it back!"

"No. It's true."

"It ain't — not exactly — "

"If it's not true, prove it."

"All right — " Still astride General Pemberton, Tam began what was now an old story to him. He had had to "show" others in just such kid-battles as this. Fred Lipscomb had come from up in Massachusetts, lost his job in a woolen mill after he'd had a leg mashed off in its machinery (with not a cent paid him). He'd come South as a peddler with his own wagon ten years or more before the Civil War, then traveled back and forth four times a year. Elijah Thaxton — then refurnishing Syringa — had got him to buy a few things for him, then more. As their business proved mutually satisfactory, it expanded more and more. Finally Fred was selling all the Thaxton and Hadyn cotton. The two men had been the same kind of friends Calvin Thaxton and Marshall Lipscomb had become in the next generation. Elijah had said more than once Fred was not only the best businessman he'd ever known but the most honest and most reliable; that if he could only trust one man it would be Fred. (He proved it later.)

When war finally came, Fred's sympathies were entirely with the South, but having only one leg he could not serve in the ranks and his Yankee origin prevented some of the "die-hards" from giving him a commissary job. He had helped financially and had done considerable spying for the South on his buying trips north (but little interrupted by the War). However, Fred Lipscomb would always be a "Yankee" to Miss Carietta.

As much of this as a boy of twelve could get straight — and some he couldn't — Tam literally pounded into an unprotesting Charles, already wondering why Mother had always dismissed the Lipscombs as "just some more Yankees come South to rob us!"

"Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Tam. I take back what I said." The winner dismounted. Charles sat up dusting dead grass from his hair that was too long for a boy's. "We can't both be General Pemberton, Tam, and it might be *more* fun being him — Ole 'Lys Grant. He had false teeth. He was always losing 'em. He got drunk and went falling around — like this." Charles reeled wildly about.

"He did? How — " suspiciously, "how you know?"

"*All* my family were *there*."

"Womenfolks, too — I s'pose."

"Some of 'em were. In Vicksburg, through the whole siege."

"What's a — siege?"

"If you'll be 'Lys Grant, I'll show you. All you gotter do is act drunk and lose your teeth and sit — until the flow-uh of Southern chivalry starves to death — 'without a murmur' — "

"I promised Mama I'd humor you, but I don't know. She said you haven't ever been allowed to play with boys much — "

"I — I haven't. But you're my comp-ny. So-o — *you* can be General Pemberton if you want to — "

"No, better not. I ain't the waiting-and-starving-without-a-murmur kind!" He had found a brown glass bottle with "Hydrogen of Peroxide" on its label, and was sliding down the bank to the creek bed. "Here's my tent!" He crawled under a dusty elder bush and held the bottle upside down on his mouth. "Whoop! Sho' is good likker — "

"Boom — boom!" Charles was firing his verbal cannon, running from one to the other, and then stepping back to declaim, "Men of the South, we must hold our position or the whole Mississippi will pass to the damned Yankees. Be of stout heart — and remember we fight for our loved ones and our — no, for the Confed'racy *and* our loved ones!"

Tam had crawled out from under his bush and was staring up. "Where'd you learn all that?"

"It's what my Great-uncle Tacitus Randolph Cahoon said at Vicksburg."

"How many battles do you know how to fight — General Pemberton?"

"Never counted 'em. Someday I might. Vicksburg is always here — on this bank. Gettysburg's over in the big pasture yonder where there's a fine Missionary Ridge. I'm General Lee then — when I'm not Pickett. Mother won't let me be Longstreet. Wish I could find a good Lookout Mountain — "

"Reardon's Bluff — where our cabin is — "

"We thought of that. But Mother won't let us go that near Syringa."

"Why not?"

"Don't you know *any*thing? Don't you know what Old Tom Bly did to the Thaxtons — *stole* Syringa 'way from 'em, that's what."

"He paid for it."

"Yes-es, he did! About one trillion-billionth what it was worth. I *know*." He looked mysteriously away to hide the complete ignorance supporting wild statements. "But I can't tell just anybody."

"I don't know 'just anybody' *wants* to know. Who's the 'we' and 'us' you keep talking about playing this game?"

"Friend of mine."

"Didn't know you had any."

"Well — a kind of friend — "

"Um-humh — 'shamed of him!"

"No. And it ain't a him — it's Leah."

"Why, Gen'l Pemberton! Playing with gur-rls! And a nigger gur-rl at that. I *am* surprised." Tam's imitation of Miss Nathalia was good enough to crack shamed anger into a weakening smile.

"Quit, Tam. Leah ain't a real niggra. She plays real good, knows more battles than I do. Want me to call her?"

"Naw! But — I guess she's all right to play with, if you ain't got nobody else, and your mama won't let — Oh, never mind — whoop! Keep your eye on Ole 'Lys Grant!" He was running in crazy circles, staggering and stumbling, waving the brown bottle. "Now I done gone and lost muh durn teeth and I'm too durn drunk to find 'em — but I must fight on — boom!" His fire was on the heights of Vicksburg, while Charles ran from "gun" to "gun" returning it. The battle was brisk and prolonged, General Grant devoting far more histrionic talent to drunkness than to military tactics. Soon he had lost seven sets of teeth. "Now I'm goner charge up the hill and take the town!"

"No — you can't do that — you gotter stay down there and starve us brave South-uners out."

"How long'll it take?"

"Oh, a long time — boom! Boom! I killed two hundred more of your men. You better get busy!"

"You didn't tell me how long this here siege is goner last — we're having apple pancakes for supper."

"Can't finish a siege in a minute."

"When was the last time you played Vicksburg?"

"'Bout a month ago?"

"Who was Gen'l Grant then?"

"A friend o' mine — "

"How long did it take Leah?"

"A long time — boom — boom! Better get back to your guns — "

"How long did it take?"

"We — we didn't get to play — long enough — that time."

"The last time you played long enough for it to surrender — how long did it take?"

"A long time — sieges *always* take a long time. This one is — "

"Shucks! I bet you ain't never played long enough for Vicksburg to surrender."

Charles's cannon stopped booming. "Well, the damyankees only won it because they dee-ceived General Pemberton, made him think they had more troops than they did. That's not fair — so *we* don't ever surrender Vicksburg!"

"Well! That's just like Pop says: All y'all spend more time fooling yourselves about the Civil War than you do ree-alizing you were defeated and making a living."

"We were not — defeated. We — we were — overwhelmed!"

General Grant made a threatening face, tore off a drunken reel, then stopped. "Whut's — overwhelmed?"

"You don't know what that is? It's a — a — aw, look it up in a dictionary. If —" cagily, "if you're tired of Vicksburg — You're my comp'ny. See the horse trough at the edge of the pasture? That's the Atlantic Ocean. We can have the Race to the Sea. You'll be — I mean which you want to be this time, Gen'l Hood — or Ole Sherman?" Then persuasively, "*He* won!"

"I won't be no Sherman."

"All right, you be Gen'l Hood and I'll be — the enemy —"

"Sherman!"

"No — we're playing Ole Sherman is way over yonder by Thaxton Hill someplace an' I'm commanding *another* enemy —"

"That don't sound right. *I'll* be Sherman. Soon's I git these durn shoes and stockings off — where do we start *from?*"

"This log usually — and end at the water trough. It's about a eighth of a mile —"

"How you know?"

"I said 'about.'"

"All right. Get back here even. 'One for the money — two for the show — three to make ready and four for to *go!*'" They dashed down the uneven grassy slope. Tam's thick bare legs in knee pants drove up and down under a body almost erect, arms working hard as legs. Charles's movements were more like those of a deer, long, swinging blue-overalled springs revealing no effort. Gradually they overcame Tam's initial lead. Almost to the trough, a final leap carried Charles past it first.

Both came back to sit on its edge. Tam was shamed and a little mad, Charles trying to conceal his heavy breathing and satisfaction. "That wasn't like hist'ry said, Tam." He was speaking very slowly, in order to speak at all. "I ought to've slowed down and let the No'th win — but I felt like I had to do my best — somehow. Guess I did sorter show off some, too. That's bad manners — and — I oughtn't've done it."

"You run pretty good. I think I — ett something over to Miss Milly's yesterday. Haven't been feeling my best since."

"Oh!" The day was not nearly so bright as it had been. "What you want to play now, Tam?"

"Want to set that old can on a fence post and chunk some of this here gravel to see who needs most shots to knock it off?"

"Mother just had this gravel put around the trough and — but you're my comp'ny. I'll put the can up and you can throw first." He walked the twenty feet to do so.

Tam's tongue tip showed between snagged teeth, tightened lips.

He took the erect, sideward position of a baseball pitcher, jerked his cap down lower over one eye, swung his left leg up, his right arm back and — The rock whizzed to the left of the can only a few inches. The second went to the right, as did the third. The fourth knocked it stem-winding. "Yo' turn!" Well satisfied, Tam replaced the can and then took his seat on the trough again with great carelessness.

Charles picked up three or four pieces of gravel, and made a careful selection of a flat, round one. Tam had used the first to hand. Charles adjusted it between thumb and forefinger, and fixed his eyes on the can. He seemed to be measuring the distance in sixteenths of an inch. He took a deep breath and held it, kept both feet on the ground and swung his right arm in a great circle, snapping it forward. The rock that he'd chosen cut the air straight for the can, hit it square in the middle with a loud plunk. "One for me. I'll set it up — "

Out of ten sets of throws, Charles won five, Tam three. Two were "ties." Tam was not having the *kind* of fun he had expected. His biggest disappointment was liking Charles.

The rock-chunking had lost its hold. They were back half sitting on the trough rim. "You *oughter* throw good — got nothing else to do but practice."

"Yes, I do. I study all the year round, don't stop for summer — like you do. I — I'm awful busy all the time — don't have much time for — throwing."

"How'd you learn then?"

"Mother had Cousin Jed come over and show me. He taught me how to swim and — to run, too."

"You — you had to have somebody *show* you?" He forced a contemptuous laugh. "I kin just see Splice — holding his belly when he hears about that."

"Sp — Splice is kind of mean, ain't he? You scared of him?"

Tam's laughter was loud, but not yet natural. "He knows better'n to fool with me, since I took him down and rubbed his nose in cow-cake two years ago. He can lick Sore Eyes and Johnnycake Cade, though."

"You're the — Chief Panther, ain't you?"

"Highest, not Chief. Takes a lot of my time, too. I have to manage when we do — interesting things, which is all the time — nearly." He looked around mysteriously as if about to confide, only to change his mind.

"Yes?" Charles mouth was very, very dry. "What do you-all play at — at school?"

"You mean at *Re*-cess? Well, us Panthers get together and sort of look things over to see are the new boys behaving theyselves. If they ain't, Splice takes 'em in hand." Looks told more than words.

"What — what about the boys bigger than you-all?"

"We stay out of their 'territory' south of the big chinaberry. Playing squat-tag last year I got chased over the line and — ooh-ee!"

"What'd they do to you?"

"Nothing much. Just near'bout killed me, that's all. Paddled my big butt so hard it lit up like a kerrysene lamp, Splice said."

"Didn't the teachers do anything — ?"

"They know better," Tam boasted. "Because Splice waits after school to hop on the one the teacher resser-cued — *new* boys 'specially."

"What happens if — a new boy — fights back?"

"Well, I'll tell you something. It's a secret — but I like you — a little. You'll tell."

"Oh, no-o, Tam."

"Well," Tam cupped one grimy paw around Charles's left ear, "it's this-a-way. The new ones Splice picks to hop on don't never fight back *because* he don't never hop on nobody his size."

"How much bigger is he than — than you?"

"I — I'd say he's about a inch taller'n you and a lot heavier. Sa-ay, how come you so interested? He's your cousin, but I didn't think a Storrow'd wipe his ass on any Rogan that ever lived."

"*I* never said so," miserably.

"Sa-ay — your ma putting you in public school this year?"

"I guess so — I mean — " Once he got started, it wasn't so hard: his mother said he was getting to be too big for private tutors. (The niggers had told Tam Miss Carietta couldn't afford to pay "dem tooters" no longer.) She had had the grade-school principal and his family over here for dinner. It was all mixed up. His tutors had done like his mother said, left out some things taught in public school. He was old enough for the Fifth Grade, but would have too much to make up on the outside. Nelia was in the fourth and could be a lot of help to him. He didn't mind being put back a grade. Tam was in the fourth and just as old as Charles. Splice was even older. His mother had decided that Tam and Charles were to be friends. There wasn't anybody *really* suitable in that grade. That was really why Tam had been invited over here today. "I didn't want you to come," Charles concluded truthfully. "But I'm kind of glad you did now. How you happen to be only in the Fourth — ?"

"I missed promotion, once from the low-second and again from the low-t'ird." He furnished a nasty look to match. "Then I had scarlet fever, and hadn't much more than got back before I broke my arm playing One-eyed Cat at recess. I'm more'n two years behind, but between you and me, I just don't give a — " Tam whispered the last word.

"Don't give a *what?*"

"You don't know what that is! 'Bout *time* you're starting to school so you'll learn something."

CHAPTER 16

IT WAS TOO HOT for school. Tam summed up the situation as he pulled and shifted to ease the scratch of new wool breeches. Tomorrow he could wear some of his old, smooth-worn ones. The first day of school he'd known better than to ask. Bought too large "on purpose," they made him feel like he was tied waist deep in a potato sack. Nothing fit him any more until he'd had it a few months and only for a few weeks then.

There were other things about school he didn't like besides uncomfortable clothes. Come to think of it, what was there he *did* like? Being in the fourth grade wasn't much different that he could see from being in the third, and that hadn't been any different from being in the second, except harder. The rest of his life, he saw now, was going to be nothing but moving from one teacher who told him he could do better if he'd only try to another who said the same dern thing. Already he was sweating. If he tugged his pants-crotch, the teacher would tell Mama. Mama would know it wasn't why the teach-

ers said, but they wouldn't. He'd bet they pulled *their* pants loose every chance they got. Goll-ee, he'd almost busted right out laughing. Mustn't get kept in the *first* day of school — the way he had last year. He could feel that switching Pop had given him in the barn yet. He'd think about something else until he could get excused and signal Spuds to get excused, too. Out in the privy he'd tell him what he suspected about Miss Jewel's pants.

"Children!" Miss Jewel Kerens was a round little owl in white shirtwaist and manure-brown serge skirt, and all of a hundred years old — forty, anyhow. "You have your book lists. As your mothers have told you, we may give longer at Christmas this year than usual and are starting classes today. We have a *full* room and must behave well for all to get the benefit of — "

"Here's a vacant desk, Miss Jewel."

"Thank you, Johnny!" Miss Jewel could be nasty-sour when she wanted to. Johnnycake had just been trying to help. "We have another pupil not yet arrived, it being a little early for the nobility."

It was just like in a show. Miss Jewel hadn't hardly finished when somebody opened the eight-foot tall double doors which led directly from the rear of the schoolroom to the graveled yard. Charles came in like a scared puppy — and that wasn't all. Dern if his maw hadn't come with him! The rustlings and turnings-in-seats increased. Meaningful looks were exchanged with exaggerated facial contortions.

"Good morning, Jewel." Miss Carietta, in gray felt hat and full-skirted gray dress, was first to speak, of course. "Where do you want Charles to sit?"

"That's Charles's desk, Miss Carietta. I'll — I'll get *you* a chair from the hall — just a moment." Miss Jewel was jumping around like a trained seal. She brought in the straight chair Tam had had to sit in for an hour when he'd been sent from the room the last day of school. "Where'd you prefer to sit, Miss Carietta?"

"Wherever *you* think best, Jewel." Before any suggestion could come she added, "By the wall here — out of the way. Would this be all right? If it isn't — "

"Just fine!" The chair was brought over and set down. As Miss Carietta glanced pointedly toward her gray skirt, Miss Jewel took her own handkerchief tucked in brown leather belt, and dusted it off.

"Oh, thank you, Jewel. Now go right ahead. Don't mind *me*. Charles, dear, isn't everything *fine?* Such pretty — brown woodwork!"

Poor Charles, red as a spoiled tomato, ducked his head.

"As I was saying, children," Miss Jewel, back up on the foot-high platform which held her scarred desk, stood in front of a blackboard, which wasn't black at all, but green, " — we must make the most of our time if we're to get the long vacation at — "

"Jewel, dear!" Miss Carietta was leaning forward in all her gray neatness, "Charles does so much better when he feels his instructor is talking directly *to* him. All his tutors said so." She did not notice the wheat-field ripple passing over the class. "Do you think one of the others — on the front row — would mind exchanging desks?"

"No, Mother! I'm all — I like this one."

"Char-rles!"

"Why — um — " The owl-face looked like its high-boned net collar was choking the blood into it. "I'll see. Would one of you — ?" She came down off the platform and stood right in front of Spuds's desk. "— *like* to change desks with Charles?" No answer came. "Is — is there?" Tam saw a heavy brown oxford nudge one of Spuds's bare feet.

"I — *I'd* like to, Miss Jewel."

"Why, that'll be fine, Birmingham!" She always called Spuds by his right first name. "We'll make the change now — "

"I — I'd rather — Birmingham kept his desk — "

"It don't make no — it's all the same to me, Charles." Spuds always wanted a front-row seat, but he moved back. Charles rose with tucked head and slunk to the empty desk. Tam actually felt sorry for Charles. This'd be heard from — at recess, most likely.

"That's *ever* so much better! Tell your mother, Birmingham, that Miss Jewel considers you a perfect little gentleman."

"*That* he is! And he'll certainly be one of those Charles will have at his party next — but I mustn't give away secrets, must I? Jewel, dear, please go right ahead — just forget I'm here. Sit up, Charles, quit sinking down in your desk like a — a ninny. Jewel, dear, I hope you'll not feel the slightest hesitancy about correcting him — if he does anything he shouldn't — Oh, Nelia!" Miss Carietta almost knelt in the widening pool of billowy gray skirts to tuck one of Nelia's drawer legs back in the top of a long black stocking. The wheat rustlings, especially feminine wheat, increased.

"Children!" Miss Jewel spoke the way she did just before she got her knuckle-rapping ferrule (not the one she used to point with) out of her desk drawer. Now Tam felt ree-eely sorry for Miss Jewel. Silence was reestablished. Keeping order was about all she could do as long as Miss Carietta was here and full of helpful suggestions. These continued through the morning recess.

When her pupils were reseated following this, Miss Jewel smoothed tight brown skirt where it kept wrinkling up. "We'll begin a quick review of High-Third work — so you can see how much you've forgotten — but don't let it distress (she would have said 'worry' if there had been no visitor) you. It'll all come back — if you really concentrate. We'll begin on last spring's arithmetic. Nelia, if you have three

magnolias and I give you a dozen more—and you want to divide them equally between five friends, how many—Oh!"

The elaborate tiptoeing-out of Miss Carietta (a finger roguishly at her lips) could not be ignored. Education was at a standstill. She vanished through the tall doors, only to have her face and gray felt hat show around one of them for a moment and smile mischievously at the children—and then at Miss Jewel in complete understanding.

It was this last which shattered Miss Jewel's admirable record of the morning. As she often said afterward, she didn't know what got into her, made her snap at the most blameless one of all, "Well, Charles, now that your mother approves, school can open. But you'd do well to remember, young man, that here you'll be no different from anyone else, even if you have had one of those fancy tutors and would still have if you could *afford* it. Nelia, there is no need for you to make calf-eyes at Charles!"

"I wasn't!" Nelia's dark gaze was steady, a little sassy. "It's not his fault Cousin Carietta came here—and I'd give each—friend three magnolias."

"Correct!" Spoken automatically, it was followed by indecision whether to overlook impertinence and retain the restored order or punish Nelia as she deserved and have to start all over. She made a little stab at her grade book. Then—"Peter—Peter Rogan, if Nelia gives you all but eight of her magnolias, how many would *you* have?"

"More'n I know what to do with!" In quick alarm at the tittering and the opening of heavy ferrule drawer, Splice added, "I mean, I'd have seven."

Miss Jewel made the same allowances she had to make the first day of school. By noon she had the class pretty well up to date in arithmetic, with some slight show of memory in spelling. It was the coming torture of listening to them try to *read*-aloud that she must not let herself think about. It was her day to have charge of the grounds during the lunch hour. That was enough for the present.

She got them marched outside, watched them choose lunch benches under the few live oaks on graveled playground. Every mother in town, it seemed, had complained about having to fix lunch for the *first* day. It was about time mothers did something for their offspring, not leave it *all* to the teachers. Not that she'd want thirty or more Miss Cariettas to contend with! Her first-day-of-school headache grew worse. The girls were on their side and the boys on theirs, gorging themselves noisily. She *should* stay right where she was. Surely they could be left alone a minute. With a show of casualness which would have done Miss Carietta credit, she sidled back inside the school building.

The other five "lady" teachers were upstairs eating their lunches in

Mister Elder's, the principal's, office. Each of those five was sure *he* was only waiting for his wife to cool another degree or two in her grave before beseeching her to have pity on the love he had kept hidden so long. Let the poor things hope, Miss Jewel sniffed silently, manufacturing romance out of such shoddy as Jake Elder. Everyone knew he had asthma and wore a truss. Well, she'd got into the Teachers' Study unobserved. She'd wet her handkerchief, lay it across her eyes and lie here on this raffia settee until she counted twenty — slowly. Then she'd have to go back — Oh, Lord, how long?

She was awakened by a tugging at her arm, sat up so suddenly the wet handkerchief fell in brown, wrinkled lap. "What — what is it — that you, Nelia?"

"Yes'm. They're picking on Charles. On that side where Mister Elder can't hear. *You* better come."

"Yes, yes, Nelia. I'm — not well, was just — I'll get Mister Elder — Elder to — " Miss Jewel had stopped. It would be a check mark in the wrong column of her teacher's record in the Principal's office if she required disciplinary assistance. "Come along. We can handle this." She drew Nelia into the First Grade room which overlooked the big oak under which all the boys were crowded. From here she could see down into the center of the ring they'd formed, could hear plainly.

" — I'm giving you 'til I count ten." It was that foul-smelling Splice Rogan, of course, standing spraddle-legged and overbearing. "You done already had three or four *tutors* — and we want to hear you *toot!* If you ain't tooted — real pretty — by the time I count ten, I'll *squeeze* it out one end or the other. One — two — "

As the numbers mounted in slow, croaky treble, Charles stood with his feet apart, his fine head, mature for a child's, thrown back. "Why, Nelia, he *is* like Hoffmann's 'Christ'!"

"Stop 'em, Miss Jewel!" Nelia pleaded, "Splice's four times as big. Stop 'em before he — "

"He's larger, my dear — but size isn't everything and if I 'protect' Charles — won't it make it harder for him after school?"

"Might — !" Nelia wasn't sure but what Miss Jewel was taking out her spite against Miss Carietta on Charles. Nor was Miss Jewel, herself. It might be a good thing, it ran through her head, for him while he was young to be rolled in good old Reardon County dust — not that she'd have picked a Rogan to do it —

" — Ten! Goner toot?"

"NO!" It was the first time Charles, outweighed at least ten pounds, had spoken, his throat so choked he could barely be heard now. "Maybe you can lick me, but you can't make me — *do* anything!"

"Say — *I* can't? Gimme room, fellers — gimme a lotta room — " Splice began side-stepping to the left, fists up like in Sweet Caporal

cigarette pictures. Charles began moving, too, eyes on Splice's eyes. He could tell already by Splice's moves that he'd never practiced by *The Pugilistic Art* as his tutors had made him. Splice was using the old John L. Sullivan positions. He'd probably forget all about them in a minute, and trust to the old rough-and-tumble of grabbing and butting to get Charles down so he could sit on him — like Tam had. Then he'd beat him as much as he wanted to. That's what would happen if all that weight ever got straddle of him. Charles must stay on his feet and keep out of clinches, no matter what. He might even have to keep backing away a long time for an opening. Already the others were making fun of him. He mustn't listen — must remember his footwork, and never quit watching those taunting eyes.

"If this here's a merry-go-round, I want to get on, too," Johnnycake yelled.

"He'd better merry-go-round while he can." Splice's long arms were out and he was weaving like a gorilla. Any time now he'd close in, grab, trip, fall on top — then —

"Get him down, Splice, get him down!" Tam had forgotten everything but that Charles was Hill Family. "Wade right in, Splice!"

"Oh, Miss Jewel, that nasty Tam Lipscomb — "

"Ssh, Nelia!" She looked at her bosom watch. "Recess'll be over — more'n likely — before either actually hits the other. Oh, dear, I really ought to stop this, I suppose, but it would only postpone — well, I never!" Charles had shot a fist over arms which missed in their wide grab, had hit Splice squarely on his big nose. Blood splattered. "Now, I really *must* stop them — "

"If you do, Miss Jewel, I'll — I'll — *please*, don't, Miss Jewel," Nelia pleaded.

Charles had come to life, was jumping in all directions, instead of just backwards. Moistening his lips with his tongue, he was tossing his head to get overlong blonde hair back from flashing eyes.

Splice was bleeding so he couldn't seem to clinch into the one hold that always worked, seemed rather to be following *all* the conflicting instructions from the crowd.

It would serve Miss Carietta right for Charles to come home black and blue. But Miss Jewel all at once *didn't* want a gamely battling Charles black and blue. Just because he had a mother like that wasn't his fault.

I ought to ring the five-minute bell ahead of time — now, I really should, thought Miss Jewell, but if I do, this will surely — start all over as soon as school is out. With not another thought in the head of any of the boys between now and then. Still —

The advantage had shifted. Expertly Charles had sprung back and then got in two quick lefts as an off-guard Splice jumped after him. It was only for a moment. Clearly, the Storrow child knew more

"theory," but all of that there was couldn't make up for the great difference in weight, strength, and, yes, brutality. Peter at last had him in a bear-hug. Their heavy fall found Charles on the bottom. All Miss Jewel could see was the furious pummeling of invisible figure.

"Goner toot?"

"No!"

She really *must* interfere. The expression on that Rogan bully's face was hideous, not a child's face at all. He wriggled his spread thighs filthily with "Always did want to wipe my ass on a Storrow. All they're fit for *now!* Give up?"

She didn't have to hear the answer. This had gone beyond "boyish disagreements which," as Mister Elder had ruled, "should settle themselves."

"Toot, damn you, *toot!*"

Miss Jewel reached behind the door for "the big paddle."

The voices from the fracas were different now—

"You've licked him *good,* Splice. Let him up—"

"Not till he toots good and loud." Loud smacks followed, surely on that proud white face down on loose gravel.

"Go on, Charles." It was Tam again. "Say 'Toot'! He's bigger than you."

"No!"

"Say—you—*won't?* See this here fist of mine? See it? When it comes down it's goner bust that pretty face all to—"

"Fight somebody your size!" Tam had shoved the others back, grabbed Splice's arm just in time to deflect the blow.

"No, Tam, no!" It was little more than a moan from Charles. Then it wasn't even that. He was quite still, limp and still, and Tam had shoved a surprised Splice off him.

Miss Jewel finally made up her mind. With four strokes of the paddle she sent Tam and Splice to opposite sides of the circle. The latter, as before when things had gone against him, blubbered. "Ole—b-bi-bitch—ouch!" The paddle had caught him full across the shoulders with a whack that promised more. "You, Peter Rogan, go to the 'Boys'' and wash your mouth out with soap. I'll see you *after* school."

"Yes'm." Splice had stamina only when he was winning.

"The rest of you—scatter! Here, Tam, wet my handkerchief—where you going, there's a hydrant right behind you." Together they bathed bleeding white face on the ground. When his eyes opened, they propped Charles against liveoak trunk. "Tam, get his—cap and books and I'll phone Miss Carietta to send for him—"

"No—*no,* Miss Jewel! Let go, Tam—I'm all right. Don't worry Mother, *please.*"

The child *wasn't* all right. But it would save a lot of explaining

to Mister Elder and, probably, some fibbing if Charles wasn't excused for the afternoon. "Keep an eye on him, Tam. Let me know if there's any more trouble or if his face stays white like that."

"*His* is always white."

"Oh, it is? Gracious!" She rang the five-minute bell as she ran. Lined up to march back in, Splice was puffing out his chest—for the world, the way that odious father of his did. He was also muttering, "Just wait—until after school" at a Charles with eyes straight to front, chin higher than usual, his walk jerky with the tautness of muscle.

It would be *so* much better if the Storrow boy could accept what had happened and forget it. Other children would—but Miss Carietta's son? Never! This would be with him always and there was no telling what it would do to him. Oh, Charles, darling, Miss Jewel wailed inwardly, this is no more your world than it is your mother's—or Lance Thaxton's!

From time to time through the afternoon, she lost the thread of what she was teaching, had to start over. Her responsibility would cease at three o'clock sharp, but her conscience would go right on worrying—she was that kind of a teacher. She couldn't keep Splice in *every* afternoon—nor, she suspected, would Charles go on home if he got the idea it was running away.

It was past two before she finally stuck to one of the numerous decisions she had adopted and rejected seconds later. She appointed Nelia monitor of the class, because Splice Rogan was the only one who might give trouble. If he defied Nelia, well, Tam would see he didn't.

"Yes, Jewel, yes! What is it?" Miss Carietta's voice over the recently installed "coffee mill" telephone was faint. Underlying graciousness deep concern came through faintly but plainly.

Miss Jewel hated to disturb her rest the very first day, but—She gave a watered-down account suitable for the ears of an excited mother.

"Can't hear you, Miss Carietta—the phone connection must be—"

"Nothing of consequence. I—I am confident Charles can take care of himself. But you did quite right to let me know. I do thank you—*so* much." She had hung up—coolly as you please. Well, Miss Jewel had done what she could. Apparently, it had been time wasted. Lady de Storrow had probably returned to her couch, dampened her brow with eau de cologne and left the whole thing to the teacher as so many "mothers know best" how to do.

Miss Jewel had not often been so mistaken. Finding her pince-nez and consulting the thin, gray-paper phone book were a matter of

seconds for Miss Carietta. She didn't consider the possibility of anyone not being in. When *she* phoned, people *were* in.

"Oh, *Cousin* Carietta, how nice to hear your—"

"Selma! This is Charles's first day at public school. Jewel Kerens has just phoned me that your son, older and *much* larger for his age, fancies himself the school—er—bully. I—don't—want to hear any more about this, Selma—you understand?"

"Yes—oh, my, yes, Cousin Carietta! I'm sure Spli—Peter didn't mean to—was just joking. These boys! You understand. I'll speak to Peter as soon as—"

"Have Oscar Rogan do it!"

"Yes, Cousin Carietta—that *would* be better. I'm so glad you let us know. The little cousins should be the best of—"

"Thank you, Selma! Goodbye." She hooked up the receiver, fastened slightly damp, too blonde ringlets higher with a shifted hairpin and freed flowing white muslin wrapper actually "adhering." This weather!

Indeed, she did "understand." She knew the gleeful satisfaction which was Selma's this very moment. But she'd do as she'd been told. The Rogans might have money and growing political say-so, but the day hadn't come when Selma Thurston would risk being scratched from Hill Family "lists"—as few and far between as those were these days. Miss Carietta wasn't in the least worried about a repetition of the event. She must find, and shortly, the one best way to put the matter in all its inconsequentiality before Charles—

He came home a little scratched about the straight Storrow nose, a little torn about the pants, with two shirt buttons missing and some skin gone off one ear. He was even more quiet. Justly proud of her delicacy in handling tense situations, Miss Carietta went to work on him. After a quarter-hour of unrelated preliminaries, still rather more abruptly than she would have liked, she did couch in offhand and most reassuring tones, "So you see, my dearest—when there are so many really important things such as these all about us, it's unnecessary to waste any time whatsoever on—such as Peter Rogan!"

"Oh!" He looked up, suddenly. "Miss Jewel told you! I asked her not—"

"Now, dear, she had to. It's part of her—work to see no one is imposed on by bullies such as—Oh, my poor darling, to have to—"

"It wasn't so very bad, Mother. I—I didn't mind—that."

Searchingly she looked at him. "Tell Mother, dear, what was it—you *did* mind?"

"I—I like Tam. I like him lots, but—but I—guess I'm the first Storrow ever had to be resser-cued by a Lipscomb."

The old cotton warehouse, fire-gutted in 1897, had the year following become Sironia's first Negro public school. (Before that, such education had been conducted by the white women of the town, for the "pickaninnies" of their own servants — and not always regularly.) There had never been any paint on the long low structure beside the railroad tracks, even in its warehouse days.

This year's first day of school was ending. The Principal was in the door as his charges lined up for freedom. It had been found impractical to have more than one door — if he was to do any teaching. He felt the warmth of September sunshine through one of Mister Lance's former frock coats. "Quit your shoving, children," he admonished as if unwilling to have his hours of authority end. "Jared Henderson — add-vance!"

A buzz of whispering showed little surprise that Jared was to have today's honor of being let out first. He wormed his way forward.

"Jared, you've made a good start. You're the star pupil for today. But don't let it swell your head. Remember — you other children mind this, too — pride go-eth before a fall."

"Why-y?"

The Principal looked down at shiny black face wedged against his elbow, raised his hand in reproof, then saw who it was. "Well, Luella, that's a fair question — a ver-r-ry elucidating question. 'Fall' means punish*ment*, sure to come after stuck-up putting on airs — "

"Miss Carietta puts on airs an' she ain't fell down I evuh hear-ed of."

"Hush, Luella. Whut she do ain't none o' yo' bizness — "

"Yanh!" from a stringy yellow gal, overtall for twelve, "Jared's a whitefolks' nigguh — ee — yanh — yanh!"

His kick aimed at a bony yellow shank missed. Luella saw, but the Principal didn't: "You, Mary Ethel Rossiter!" Smacking reprimand was tempered by the pain in his heart for all that these poor little shorn lambs had yet to learn in a town like this. "I'm ashamed of you!"

"Say you is?" Impudent yellow face promised all the trouble it was to cause later. "Well, hit's God's own trufe. *All* de Henduhsons is. Ask any — "

"That will do! For-give her, Jared — she know not what she do."

"She do, too! But I fer-gives her dis heah time," and inaudibly, "but if dey's a nex' time, I'm goner bust — "

"*That's* the Christian outlook. Goodbye, Jared." None of the others could leave until "the star pupil for today" reached the yellow-brown freight depot.

Jared wanted to run, to show off just a little, but that wouldn't do. He couldn't remember when he hadn't had it forced on him that the more praise and good luck somebody got, the humbler he ought to

feel, not just *act.* He hadn't told a living soul, didn't intend to—but he'd decided he was going to be "star pupil" every day this year.

Wearing white flour-sack shirt and loose gallus-hung overalls, washed pale blue, he was hatless and barefooted. The sand was warm between his toes. The small head was like a tanned white man's, but gingery, kinked hair couldn't be anybody's but a mulatto's; nor could the weak-looking eyes with almost white lashes and washed-out-blue pupils.

Beyond the freight depot he stopped. He'd wait here in the shade of the old hackberry with the crossing-watchman. When the other boys came by, he'd fall in with them like Mammy had told him to, had even sent Miss Hazel word he couldn't work for her today. He was going to have to start playing with Negro boys. From what had happened at recess and just a minute ago, it wasn't going to be easy. All of them knew who he *wanted* to play with.

Coming up West River Road and past the freight depot were the five he liked best. "Where y'all goin'?" He fell in step with them. Not one of them answered. One snickered, white discharge from his nose spewing down on black upper lip. "Y'all wanter come down to my house? I got me a rope to swing off de co'ncrib. Hit—hit's fun—"

"Huh," grunted beefy Booger Jackson, as light as Jared. "I don' like no ropes white boys done th'owed away. I don' like *nothin'* white boys done th'owed away, Whitefolks' Nigger!"

"I ain't no 'whitefolks'—"

"*I* says you *is.*"

"Ah say so, too!"

"Me too." Not one sided with him. Jared turned aside like he didn't care. If he hadn't they'd have seen the tears betraying him.

His bare feet rattled the worn planks of the bridge. He could have tagged along, could have won the fights that had to come before they'd let up on him. He could wallow that fat, high-yeller Booger Jackson in the dust easy, but he just plain didn't care enough about it. Maybe he would later. (That was the beginning of a choice which would determine much of what was to happen to him, a bad choice, but he could not have made any other.)

He went on up Junk Street toward the Square. Its crumbly paint-flaked brick buildings, mostly two stories high, all part of the beginnings of Sironia, had nothing in the way of a future. They rented for very little, and likely as not *that* wasn't paid. They did have fine bargains at times. Jared liked to look at all the things offered for sale, especially those nobody else would have. He liked the way the white men and Negro men in this part of town had stores right next to each

other and seemed to get along as well as he and Tam and Spuds had — "until there's a argiment," somebody always had to put in.

He stopped before a dirt- and cob-webbed show window. It held mostly second-hand skillets and worn plow points. He'd hang around here and the Square; maybe, on Main — where Negroes weren't supposed to go except on business — until suppertime. When Mammy came in puffing over her long walk from Hadyn Hill and asked each child for a full account of his day, he could say truthfully he had fooled around with Booger and them after school for *a while* and got home just in time to help Luella fix supper. Luella wouldn't tell on him. She was his fave-rite relative. Right now he'd have himself a fine time just pretending everything in all the Junk Street windows was his.

He ought to be having a fine time but he wasn't. Everybody he met knowed — it seemed like — he hadn't no business here. He saw Tam once — on Main. They gave each other the high-sign. That was all. it was funny: Tam walking home from school with Marse Charles. He'd made fun of him a million times. Wonder who it was had hit Marse Charles, scuffed the skin off one ear?

Jared looked in Phillips' window, tried to get interested in the three-foot-tall globes of red and green. The medicine-sweet soda-fountain air smelled good.

"Hel-lo, Jared." The soft, friendly voice just back of him couldn't be nobody *else's*.

"Howdy, Marse Lance. You's lookin' well." Polite folks said that without looking to see how folks really did look. "How you likes dis fine weather we'se havin'?"

"I like *all* kinds of weather. This kind *is* better — for walking." He never had much trouble saying what he wanted to to Jared, because he didn't have to try so hard to be sure he was right. "I like to walk — "

"*Sho'!* I specs you's de bes' walker in de County — maybe in de whole world. You oughter *write* down how much you walk every day an' — "

"By Jupiter, I never thought of that. I can — put down how many steps I take to a mile when I walk slow and how many — fast — "

"How you goner know how furr is a mile?"

"Why, I — " Uncertainty lost in excitement came back. Clean-chiseled, sensitive lips were atremble with disappointment. "I didn't think about — that."

Jared was ashamed of himself for spoiling things. If Marse Lance cried, he'd cry too. "I knows whar we kin borrer a long tape measure and — but yo' maw don't want you havin' no truck wid Miz Hazel — "

"I'm going to tell you a secret, Jared." Nobody liked secrets better

than Jared, unless it was Mister Lance. "Mo-other doesn't know it, but Mrs. Elliott has called me in when I'm walking by late of an evening — lots of times — three or four, anyway — for a piece of pie or cake or — She always compliments — Father."

"Is dat so! But I thought up a better way. Miz Hazel tole me — jus' las' week — 'bout Mistuh Bill timin' his horses. He tole her from de lumber-yard hitchin' post to de Balcoms' back do' is *zac'ly* a mile. By walkin' it now, we — could — find out how many steps does a mile take you."

"Now — let me see." From an inner pocket of rusty old frocktail coat came a worn black notebook and a pencil. He jabbed notes down jus' like his maw fer de world! Carefully he put down "600." He waited a moment, then drew a heavy line under it. After this there was a long wait while he looked up Main Street uncertainly.

"Whut's de six hundred fer?"

"Six hundred? Where?"

"In de book — whar you jus' put it down."

"Oh, that! That's the number of the house I live in. Mother says that's the first thing to remember if I ever get lost. Come over sometime. I'll show you my pigeons, be real glad to!"

"Tha's *mighty* nice. But whut's yo' house number got to do wid what we're — you're figgerin', Marse Lance?"

"I — I thought you'd like to know where I live."

"Oh — I sholy would. I — I bettuh be gettin' on home — "

"Now that you know where I live you must come over sometime — real soon. Please come, Jare-red."

"I sholy will and thanky, suh." Gone were the inner miseries that had been cramping his insides. He turned off to wipe away with a knuckle happy tears. "De train's comin' in. Wanter go down to de dee-po?"

"Why, yes, I'd like to very much, Jared." He bowed. "And thank you kindly for the invitation — "

The afternoon train was not *really* late. No one expected it on time. If it had been, neither of the old Negro hack drivers would have been on hand to meet it. As Mister Lance and Jared reached the lumber-yard a block away, dusty old engine with two creaking wooden coaches was just pulling in.

"Whut's de mattuh, Marse Lance?"

The other pointed at one of the decrepit old "hacks." Its black paint was dingy and most of its once plentiful glass cracked or entirely missing. "Mo-other says I oughtn't mind, but I — I — "

"Co'se not! De othah one's Miz Hazel's ole surrey and — she

laughs 'bout hit. Say hit's a good lesson to folks never to be sure 'bout nothin'. She say, anyhow, her'n looks bettuh dan Miz Milly's *now*. Why'd she say dat?"

"Say what?"

"Never mind. Look, Marse Lance—look who's gettin' in yo' maw's ole con—convenience!"

"Who is she, Jared?"

"I axed Mammy dat question onct whin dey driv past us one night on River Road—"

"Who's 'they'?"

"Mammy said to keep my mouf shut. But I'm sure hit's all right to tell *you*. She was wid—Mistuh Marshall: usual she git in on de *night* train an' meet him at de dark end o' de station flatform."

White forehead wrinkled deeply, hopelessly. There had been something about this—but—no use, it wouldn't come back to him.

"De las' time I seed her, I was cleanin' up at de dee-po'. He threw me a quarter to git her suitcases in his buggy. She don't 'pear to have none along today. Mus' not goner stay long. My, ain't dat dark blue dress *pritty!*"

As the Glass Box's one skinny gray horse started, its passenger in navy blue taffeta with a cloak of the same color felt the old springs of the back-seat cushion give rustily. She anticipated old Pomphrey's question. "No—no baggage, Uncle. This trip's—strictly business." She smiled the spaced front teeth into plain view. "I think it might be a good idea to drive up Main Street and turn right at—Aurelia."

Yellowish eyes in grayish black rolled ominously. "You ain't aimin' ter go *in* to see 'im, is you—ma'am?"

"Not—today! But I came earlier this trip. My letter of yesterday might not have been delivered yet."

"Seems lak de mail," encouraged Pomphrey, who had never had a letter in his life, "ain't so prompt-like lately. Did you say you writ Mistuh—"

"I didn't say *who*."

"My deef-ness muss be gittin' wusser—"

"Must be!" Patsy Garrick was in excellent humor. Look at old Hone gawking down at her, between feet propped on his second-floor sill. She smoothed wide, dark brows and loosened red lips in a wide smile just for him that revealed the one flaw in her beauty. But if she had the spacing corrected, what'd she use as an excuse to get money for every few years?

"A little faster, Uncle!" They were passing that common wife of *his*. She was walking, had recognized her all right, and looked away hurriedly. The smile flashed again. It wouldn't hurt a bit for Marshall to hear his wife knew she was in town. His latest installment was overdue.

"Heah we is!" sullenly.

She adjusted the folds of her cloak. The dark cock feathers curling down the nape of her white neck from the small navy hat felt just right. "Knock, Uncle. He'll see me when he opens the door."

"Mistuh Marshall'll sho' be mad if I does."

"*You'll* sho' be sorry if you don't!"

The old Negro climbed down grumbling and mumbling, did as he'd been bidden. The side door opened. "Good afternoon, Marshall." Patsy held out a blue-gloved hand, with an aside to Pomphrey, "Hitch the horses to that tree. Watch the time — be back in fifteen minutes — "

"*Five* minutes, Pomphrey!"

"Yes, suh, Mistuh Marshall." He shuffled away, old head moving more than old feet, his disapproval plain.

Laughter tinkled harshly. "He thinks *you* need protection. Where's your sense of humor, Marshall?"

"You haven't left me any!" He came around to the side of the old brougham away from the Store, obviously so she would face away from it. He spoke low, implacably. "Such brazen calls as this are not going to help — "

"Think not?" Mock seriousness was as maddening as it was intended to be. There was some gray in her hair, but it lent no softness to sharply featured beauty. "Might be a good idea if you read my letter *again*."

"Patsy — I'll give you all I can spare, but I've no idea ever again of — *touching* you."

"I'll give you plenty of time to *get* the idea. Look at me. Am I no longer — " petulant little *moue* would have been devastating — once, " — attractive?"

"I mean it. I'm not going to see you again. You've got every cent I — "

"You *had* better read that letter again!"

"Not necessary. My answer is 'No!' If you want to yell your head off, start yelling. Tell whatever you want to about me."

"But, dar-ling! When I start 'yelling,' it won't be just about *you!*"

"You're the most heartless — *animal* I've ever — "

"Oh, dear — all that again. Do you meet me up yonder — or do I drive a few blocks and make a very informative little social call on a certain — How very fortunate looks can't kill. I wouldn't want to make you a murderer, Marshall — that is, not if I'm the victim." A thin thread of what might be fear wove through sinister jesting. "You just aren't the killing kind, my dear. That's another way we differ. If I felt someone stood in my way, I could remove — him — or her. *Which* way do I drive, my dear?"

"I — I'll meet you — as soon as it gets dark — "

"Mmm — romantic!" She had watched this most humbling of many surrenders. "You are very wise, Marshall, not to — cross me. The key? You haven't moved it to lock me out?"

He shook his head.

Pomphrey, summoned back, unhitched the horses and drove off. There was a gracious bow from Patsy, nothing from Marshall. They turned east on the long, roundabout way to the Bluff Cabin.

"Pomphrey, drive up this next street — Second, isn't it? — to where Reardon's Pasture starts, and then come back down the full length of Main. I might get a glimpse of some of my old friends here."

"Yas'm." She sure had Mister Marshall "whupped down," something Pomphrey had never expected to see in this life, didn't like it now that he had seen it.

The drive down Main yielded what she wanted it to. Watch those jaws drop! A man — a drummer, no doubt — in front of the hotel whistled. She ignored him so thoroughly a salvo of additional whistles followed. She didn't need to be told how to act like a lady. She'd *been* a lady — as long as it had been expedient, a little *longer*, she thought sometimes. She laughed lightly. The Merchant of Sironia had really thought — for a second — he could hold out against her. It was — strange how things were working out. Tommy's little diversions had taken what self-respect she had left. But if she'd never been at Syringa she could never have learned what was now the keystone of all her future plans. She felt almost kindly toward the old son of a bitch. After all, could he help being born with those — urges? Probably *his* share of "The Reardon Curse"! She'd never have believed there could be any such combination of many men in one. Vile and low and everything despicable, he was, also, bighearted and open-handed. She could admire a man who didn't give a damn what she did or said.

Comfortable self-satisfaction came over her: nobody, whatever else he might think, could say truthfully that Patsy Garrick wasn't a fair-minded woman. Well, she could afford to be with everything going just the way she wanted it. Someday — after her Lipscomb Era and the New York Era to follow, it would be interesting to prove she'd been right about a luxury she couldn't afford yet — Jed Hadyn.

"Wanter go on up yonder now, Miss Patsy?"

"I suppose so — say, isn't this the old outfit of high-and-mighty Mrs. Thaxton?"

"I kain't rightly say."

She laughed at his lying to show disapproval of her even referring to "Quality." "I'm almost sure this carriage is the one Mrs. Thaxton was in when she had that famous Main Street race years ago."

"I wouldn' rightly know, ma'am."

"No-o? I may reopen *my* old home before long!" Idly, just like

that it had come to her that she soon would have enough to buy it back, long on the market for little or nothing, and return in style to make a great many fine ladies eat a great many whispered words.

"Would you like to leave Sironia, come drive for me in—"

"No, ma'am!"

"Well, I must say!" She should laugh nastily—but this damn nigger had made her unhappy. She had had *enough* unhappiness. She needed brightening up. "Don't turn off here. I'll pay my—respects at Syringa—then go on over to the cabin—"

"Mister Bly ain't no man tuh trifle wid. He won' stand fer all whut Mistuh Marshull do."

"No?" She'd show this impertinent nigger a few things, that "No, ma'am" of his still smarting. She must make a few repairs, the warm day and the dust were making her faint. "Stop, you black fool!" she screamed. "I use the *front* entrance."

"Yes'm." Obediently Pomphrey wheeled the bony gray aside to the drive which swung grandly to Syringa's double-staired front.

"I'll not get out. Strike the door knocker. When that old crow, Cassius, answers, tell him Miss Patsy is waiting for his master—out here!"

Cassius, answering the thud of the knocker, for the first time showed he could be surprised.

"Ain't heah!"

"Where is he?" Patsy called.

"Ridin' fence in de wes' fields. I seed 'im whin we driv up," Pomphrey put in.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn' ax me!"

"Well, of all the—!"

They found "Young Tom" directing the repair of a fallen gate to a cotton field. He turned in great weather-stained black saddle. There was no smile, no change of expression.

"Hitch the team to the fence post nearest Mister Bly, Pomphrey, and then go back to the house and get me a glass of water from the *north* cistern. You'll excuse my manners, won't you—Tommsy?"

"You have some?"

"Now, Tommsy! You can't say I've been annoying you lately—"

"No, but I never had any serious doubts you'd start again some day. This is a very lovely one and I don't intend to have it spoiled. Tell me what you want, Patsy—and I'll answer 'no' as politely as I can."

"Sweet! Saves us both time." She leaned out one window, long glassless. He reined alongside. "Unexpected debts, again, my dear. I don't know what I could have been thinking of—"

"How much—this time?"

"How can you be so — cynical with all this beau-u-ty — around? Three thousand — more or less — is all — right now."

"Right now?"

"Naturally. Why, what — what has come over you? You didn't used to be so — understanding. Surely you don't think I'd divulge all that *cheap* Syringa melodrama — the storm of 1861 and — so on?" She paused significantly. "Didn't know I knew about *that*, did you — darling?"

"May I be entirely — frank, Patsy?"

"Please, *do!*"

"Very well — in regard to that 'three thousand right now' — I'll see you in hell first!"

"Wha-at! Oh, you will, will you? My dear, you just *think* you will. I'll drag your sister down where she belongs. Why, when I get through — "

"But you *won't* get through. One word of — all that and these," he held up a pair of hands, all long bones and corded muscles, "— will meet like this around your throat, not so beautiful now as it once was, but a lot more than it will be when these let go!"

Wide dark eyes sought the gray slits of his, took in calm, emotionless austerity. Straight as a beam of light he sat the black saddle, might just as well have finished saying that he hoped it would rain in time for fall planting.

"You've bluffed most of the trash around here, but you can't — "

"You think I'm bluffing?"

She tried to laugh, but no laugh escaped from a throat which could feel the imaginary vise of those ghastly fingers. "Is that all — you've got to say to — "

"Yes — *no!* I don't care much what you do to Marshall Lipscomb, after the mess he let you get him into. But I don't like female vultures unless they eat what they're supposed to! If you don't cut Syringa off your — list, these will cut you off of its." Horrible fingers repeated their grisly gesture.

Her face became even more pale. "You can't scare me. You'll come around when you stop to think what I can do — and what I'm going to do, unless — Pomphrey!" she called loudly as his hands moved again. When the old Negro had come with the glass of water, she seized it hurriedly, took a deep draught, then spit it out. "You black bastard!" The thrown glass broke against a black temple. From the fresh cut, a slight bleeding oozed.

"Drive the — Drive her," Young Tom spoke as steadily as he sat the black saddle, "— where she wants to go!"

Old Pomphrey, dazed, jaw set, climbed up front. The scrawny gray horse under slashing whip sprang away with much of its onetime fire,

"The glass box" swaying and creaking as worn hubs screeched. She sat rigidly, much as Young Tom had, one hand shoved in her navy reticule, a finger reassuringly on the trigger of the small revolver it concealed.

At the cabin's cedar gate, she sprang out before he had fully stopped. "Your money is on the back seat. Don't wait or come back!" Already she was hastening up graveled walk between the cedars Tam had planted, twice pausing to listen. If there was one following step, she'd fire. She knew nigger hatred when she saw it — giving her *dishwater* to drink! He'd learned something — would learn more, if he — he or anybody else!

Where was that key? Ought to be between these two chimney-rocks. Now she had it. The smell of dead air as she opened the cedarwood door was heavy with the cooped-up scent of old furniture, of burnt-out hickory fire on the hearth, of dust — dust — dust.

Movement to lay her reticule on the rustic table before the rock mantel was not completed. Instead she ran a white hand, its skin just beginning to crêpe, over the wood. "Uggh!" She went to the old cupboard for a napkin. She wiped off the table and one of the rustic chairs, and then shook the napkin out the door and got another to spread under her hat, reticule and cloak on the table. Loose windows, double-latched against theft when the cabin was not in use, were raised with difficulty. The loose-woven cover of the old couch held enough dust for ten rooms. She shook it outside in the last weak rays of summer sun. More heat was coming from the ground than from the sky.

She looked at the sun again. Plenty of time, but she dared not lie down as she so much wanted to do. She was always dull-witted following an afternoon nap, and to be so today would be — well, rankest extravagance!

The blue taffeta — especially designed so that, unlike the current mode, she could get in and out of it unaided — came off and was hung out one of the small windows, bodice wrong side out. "Uggh!" she gave another characteristic little sigh of disgust. She didn't like herself tired and hot. Expert, practiced inhalations and quick inward pushes released her long straight-front corset. She hung it over a chair, then held her breath as long as she could to postpone the little spreads which nothing she'd tried had kept from increasing. At that, she didn't know of a woman her age who looked less ridiculous naked. Where was that damn dishpan?

Very pleased with herself, she went about her toilette, soon was ready to get back into "armor." If she could just have this evening to herself, leave off all these tight things. That time would come, but would she welcome it? It wouldn't be more than a few years before

she'd have "The Lipscomb Plan" and "The New York Plan" both to draw on —

She had passed the cracked mirror over the washstand, paused in admiration of full-bloom charm. No girl who looked like this — even if it was just in a dim light — need worry.

She removed the slightly soiled white ruching from high blue collar, replaced it with a fresh strip from the hold-all reticule. The old one she dropped on white ashes, then picked it up and put it in beside the pistol. That little bastard Tam was forever coming up here for picnics. So long as Marshall behaved himself as she directed it was not to her interest to start even children wondering why a lady's bit of ruching should be found here. Why, his common hulk of a wife had probably never seen such in her whole washtub existence.

Again in all her dark blue finery, it was the lady in her who swayed out of the cabin door to watch the sun's afterglow withdraw behind Syringa. She was the refined, dainty Patsy Garrick, quite beautiful now that her lips were closed in a smile of mysterious sweetness. If only this airless blue taffeta would give just a little, instead of cutting across her bosom at every deep breath. But one had to have taffeta. Its rustle got them helpless in a fraction of the time serge did. There was no wind, and wavy dark pompadour stayed proudly in place without its hat. She'd stroll along the edge of the Bluff, and watch darkness swallow up the hateful little town, morass of dull-witted pettiness. If that sleepy-looking fisherman down there looked up, recognized her — so much the better! No such luck — it was that half-wit Lance Thaxton.

She halted suddenly. Was that a boat on this side — someone coming here? She thought not. But a poor, lone, defenseless woman like Patsy Garrick — she laughed aloud happily — could not be too careful. She went back inside and came out with her reticule. It would serve doubly, prevent limestone markings on the dark taffeta when she sat on it — after taking the pistol out, of course.

At the jagged edge, she looked far down at Sironia in the right-angle bend of the river, Sironia with its three arrogant hills. She had forgotten how thick the trees were, but not the ugly brownish-green of the River. Suppose she forced Tommsy to give her Syringa. It wouldn't be any worse than the way his old daddy had *got* it! He hadn't scared her a bit, now that she was out of reach of those fingers — not with what she knew! She'd have this to look at the rest of her life — but what else? Patsy Garrick loved beauty in nature as much as the next one, but in widely spaced doses.

She had never been so near the edge of the Bluff before except in complete darkness and with Marshall's arm about her. At such times she had barely noticed this. It was a whole slab of the Bluff which

had split off — some time around Genesis, probably. It stood away to itself like a slice of — not cake, more like a wide, thin iceberg. What was it Marshall had said it was called? "The Devil's — "? Whatever-it-was, it was where that Hadyn weakling had been found who rode his horse over the Bluff. It formed a half-funnel with the bluff on which she stood, a funnel so wide at the top that even the speed of the horse had not carried his rider over its outer wall. She wished she could have seen it. But perhaps if there'd been a Patsy Garrick around, the bereaved widower might not have wanted to die at all. Certainly not if he'd been anything like that Jed of his.

She looked to the south. That must be Marshall now, in that old buggy crossing the South Wagon Bridge. Around here there were so many old buggies and so many old horses and so many old — fools — it was easy in this light to mistake one for the other.

She'd be sitting here — enjoying the beauty of the evening with no thought of men, nor money, nor —

Someone was coming from behind her, in the cedar. Marshall, of course — she'd been mistaken. She drew her feet together quickly, started to rise, was only half erect and half turned when she realized she was no longer alone, recognized the figure approaching from the cedar-hidden ravine.

Down Thaxton Avenue, Jared's feet wanted to jig like Bennie's. They held more happiness than they had, or would, for a long time. Clay dust made them darker than they were naturally. Mister Lance always made him feel good. Jared began to whistle something — he didn't know what. *He* was as much white as he was black, and he didn't care what anybody said, that was how he felt — no, he didn't, he'd promised Mammy he'd never say a thing — *think* a thing like that again. She had talked to Leah and him — off to themselves — more than once, always ending up any question she couldn't answer with "De Lawd's ways is cure-yus, an' whin you don' unnerstan' you keep on prayin' an' mo'n likely you will." It *was* a good feeling when you laid yourself on Jesus' bosom and sang out loud, "I ain't wu'thy, Oh Lawd, My God, but I trustes myse'f to you!" It was a kind of quiet and peacefulness that was just the opposite of asking yourself all kinds of questions: Why is some rich and some poor? Why hasn't Old Judge Rogan, who everybody says is so crooked, been punished? Why does the color of the skin you're born with settle what you can do or can't do? No matter how hard you try and how much you pray! No, Lawd an' Jesus, he hadn't meant that. He was sorry, and would just throw himself on the bosom of the Lord and "follow in his train."

That was another hymn he'd never understood. If you followed in the Lord's train, did *it* have *more* cars? A caboose? And what did the Lord "go on before" *in*? A faster train or — no, the Lord didn't need no convenience to carry him — he just zipped ahead "wid de speed of a frightened gazelly," like the evangelist preacher had said, but he never had said what a gazelly was. It sure must be fast. Faster even than Mister Lance could walk. Jared began taking the long, fast steps he'd had to to keep up with him when they measured off the mile from the lumber yard. There'd been somewhere between fifteen and sixteen hundred. He'd lost count and Mister Lance hadn't ever got started. They'd decided they'd do it over the first clear day. Jared would bring the pencil and paper, and then he couldn't get mixed up, forget — like he had when Booger Jackson had yelled, "Snigger, Snigger, Snigger — Whitefolks' Nigger!" It hadn't made any sense. Things kids yelled at each other didn't have to — so long as they hurt feelings.

Jared turned into River Road and took the sagging pickets around Mammy's cabin at a running jump that landed him by the biggest chinaberry tree in the yard. Its yellow leaves were beginning to go, leaving only the clusters of shriveled yellow balls. A few would hang on until next spring.

"An' how iz you dis evenin', Miz Loo-eeza!" Jared squatted to receive between his knees the writhing, bony, mangy body of old greyhound bitch. "Why, Miz Loo-eeza! I do b'leeve you goner pup agin. Ain' you ever goner luhn how much trouble 'tis fer Mammy findin' folks to take yo' pups? But — " he rubbed noses with the pointed hide-bound skull, "so long's you kin have 'em, I guess we kin find folks to take 'em." He kept talking, never saw a dog that liked to be talked to and have her titted belly scratched as much as Louisa. There wasn't nothing she liked as good — 'lessn it was havin' pups. He'd watched her "pup" — with a feeling he never had any other time: when each slimy little hunk of meat slid out — and then all-a-sudden was a dawg. "You, Lou-eeza!" He laughed at the enthusiasm with which the old bitch was weaving in and out between his knees when he walked. She'd learned that trick easy, even if some did say greyhounds had had all the sense bred out of their narrow skulls. She had *plenty* sense, was better to have for a friend than — some *folks* he knew about. That was why it always rubbed him the wrong way for Mammy, when she was "zasperated" with Lilybeth having another baby, to tell her, "You's bad as — No, you's wuss'n Loo-eeza!"

Lilybeth was inside the front room now. This was Mammy's and Luella's room — and Lilybeth's, too, between trips. She must have just drapped in today. Nobody ever expected her to stay more than a week or two. She had on a new black satin dress, unfastened in the back so it hung like a mother-hubbard. Her bare feet were wide-

sprawled in front of the old walnut rocking chair that had been Mister Calvin's until he wore it out, almost.

"Hello, Son Ja'ed!" Lilybeth took a long suck on a big yellow orange. "Want some?"

"No thanks — no — thank yuh, ma'am." He knew he ought to say "Mommer," but she never had seemed like his mother, and it wasn't treating Mammy right to call anybody by a name so near like "Mammy." It made no difference to Lilybeth. "You goner git suppah?"

"Me?" She laughed the high, rattly laugh, another thing that always rubbed him the wrong way. "You know yo' — maw kain't boil hot water! You go right ahead jus' like I wasn't heah. Ain't *goner* be fer long — "

"Yas'm." Jared threw his schoolbooks into the next room, his and Bennie's, and went on into the shed room tacked on back, a combined kitchen, dining room, parlor, study hall and guest room.

He got out the corn meal and mixed up a batch of bread. The sow-belly was getting a little strong, but a little extra cooking would fix that. He sliced off the usual three slices each for Luella, Bennie and him and then called, "How many slices o' bakin you want?"

"One's nuff — bin eatin' ah-unges all af'noon — "

"Heah — dat ain't no way to cut bacon. Ain't *nothin'* done right in dis house less'n *I* does hit."

"Wheah at you bin since school was out, Luella?"

"De schoolhouse wuz so duhty I knew de teachers wouldn' never git hit clean in time fer tomorruh — so I stayed to he'p — "

"I bet you did mo' 'an all de res' put tuhgether — "

The fine teeth flashed happily. "I wuks fas' — dey all say I wuks de bes' o' anv!" (Luella wasn't ever to know that all anybody had to do to make her wear herself out for them was to tell her how well she worked. In all the "nigger-mis'ry" that was to come to her, Luella never lost the ability to work herself into something a lot like pure contentment.)

She set the table in one corner covered with a complex pattern of red and green oilcloth. She filled the syrup pitcher with sorghum and, after dubiously sniffing it, put out what was left of the pat of butter Mammy had "toted" from Hadyns' the night before.

"Whar's Bennie — hones', dat chile's goner be de death o' me!" Fourteen-year-old Luella had imitated Mammy so long it wasn't imitation any more. "I betchah he's out behindst de privy agin, practicin' dat pigeon-wing."

"Ain't no help, nohow. Like Mammy say, he's de kind goner make othah folks — folks like you — wuk fer 'im. Ev'y time I gits mad wid his uselessness an' stahts ter wade into him, he makes out like he's a

chicken wid his head chopped off, and dances around so crazy I gin to laughin'. Kain't nobody dance better'n Bennie! Oh, Lu-ella." He tilted his face, yellower than ever in new lamplight, toward the front of the house and mumbled, "*She's* back. I fergot to tell—"

"Why you reckon I come in de back way?" She went to the rear door and yelled, "You—Bennie Henduhson!" Loud voice was unbelievably deep and rich for a child's—for a woman's, even. She'd been told that nobody wanted a woman to sing bass, and had set her mark at "Fust Cunn-tralter" of the "New Hope and Dawning Day Combined Methodist Episcopal Colored Churches of Reardon County." Again she called. "You kin come on in now—all de wuk's done. Dey won' be nuthin' lef'—an' I ainter goner cook extry fer yuh." There couldn't have been any bigger lie than that. "You, Bennie Hen-der-suh-uhn!"

"Pudder-r-rum-pump-pump! Pudder-rum-pump-pump!" It was Bennie-Chicken all right, coming out from back of the privy's morning-glories. He was marching like the minstrel parade men did. Two little black hands made Jared see a big bass drum out in front of him just as plain. He was wiggling his narrow middle in old flour-sacking breeches.

"Don' laught at 'im, Luella." Jared set his own face. If somebody didn't start making Bennie do his part of the work he was goner grow up no-'count and wuthless and—and—

"Pudder-r-rum-pump—boop!" Bennie had deliberately tripped himself and done the running, sprawling, somersaulting fall the minstrel clown always did. Only Bennie was a lot funnier. It just wasn't no use trying to hold in. Luella and Jared both got the "giggles." Bennie, with his audience in his hands, got up and pretended he'd got hit on the head and was wandering out of the minstrel march and then having to run to get back in, keep his hat (which wasn't there) on straight, keep his music (which wasn't there) on his drum, and in between bow and wave to the crowds, while real bothered about where his feet were taking him.

"Look's like he done took after his popper. Looks like I done borned a show-actor!" Lilybeth in the still unhooked, free-hanging black satin slouched back of Luella. "Mought take 'im a-travelin' wid me—come spring. I needs to laugh mo'. An' laughin's all dat monkey's good fer. Mammy oughter *beat* some serious-ness inter him—"

"He's all right, ma'am," Luella defended stoutly, thick body aquiver with the need to help somebody in trouble. "He ain't only but nine, goin' on tin."

"Reckon *ah* oughter know." The rattly laugh had a dirty sound, like men's when they told jokes Jared hadn't seen anything funny about. "I was theah at de time."

"Was it—" natural, inborn curiosity had overcome all else that would have stopped Luella, "was it like havin' pups?"

"Loo-ella Henduh-son!"

"Don't scold her, Ja'ed!" For the first time Lilybeth gave an order. "Hit's a lot like havin' pups — 'though I ain't sayin' as how I ever had pups. Never mind, fergit it! I sho' got me a *mixtry* o' chillun."

The next half-hour would have been a long one, a very unsatisfactory one — if it hadn't been for Bennie. There just wasn't any settling that rascal. All black skin, button eyes and energy, he really was more like a day-old-chick in the face than anything else.

Jared made him help with the dishes, although his juggling and grimacing prolonged the task. Lilybeth had given each of them a shiny new two-bit-piece and gone back to her rocker. She might leave tomorrow and she might not, she said, depending on how the spirit moved her. She'd promised to meet a friend, but he could wait. Right now she hadn't dee-cided.

The supper things were clean — in spite of Bennie's help. Luella got him started on his lessons and then she and Jared got at theirs. Both of them liked to study, and the only trouble they had was Luella's habit of studying aloud without knowing it. On such occasions Jared, who had placed his chair for that purpose, without a word would kick her under the table. Her legs were so fat they were easy to hit without looking. Luella wouldn't get mad, nor cry. She'd quit studying aloud — for a few minutes. The bacon and meal and kerosene and Bennie's dirty overalls (as he lay asleep across his spelling book) all compounded into a smell that just naturally seemed part of studying.

By eight the lessons were over. He made Bennie go to the privy. Lilybeth had gone to bed. Why should she wait to talk to Mammy — when about all Mammy ever did was to scold and mumble a lot of words about her way of doing? Mammy loved her and would support her and fight for her all the way — just like a lot of people always would later for Bennie. The onliest thing wrong was that when Mammy loved anybody she was forever-and-a-day "settin' 'em right." And Lilybeth in a new white china silk nightgown didn't want to be set right. Gals that got set right didn't get no white china silk nightgowns — fer one thing.

Bennie in the middle of playing he was a billy goat that butted everybody had just slumped down on the porch floor. Jared and Luella let him lie. It was cooler out here. These planks wasn't much harder than his pallet inside next to Jared's, nohow.

In a lot of ways this was the best part of the day to brother and sister. They could talk to each other about the way they wanted things to be. The more they talked about them the nearer they seemed that way. Sitting on the ground between Mammy's two biggest washtubs, handle-hung on the outside wall, they leaned back, looked up into and in between all the stars. Bare toes wriggled in the

sandy soil as the pleasures of their imagining became too strong for inaction. Neither paid any attention to Mammy's arrival inside, her low talk with the whiny Lilybeth, nor her work in the kitchen.

"An' whut you goner do aftuh you done opened de bigges' school in de worl' an' bin made de prezzy-dent, Luella?"

"I'mer goner git me a change-bull silk shutwase an'—an' a red skuht. Hit'll have bi-ig buttons down de plak-kit an' a red velvutt hat wid—wid—Whut kinder hat, Ja'ed, is I goner git me?"

Jared was always tickled by her main weakness, clothes. She could work harder than anybody and longer, hour after hour. But just let somebody say something about shoes, or dresses, or hats—!

"I don' know whut kind, but I sho' bets you gits lots of 'em. An' Mammy'll keep right on tellin' you de sins o' vann-ty."

"I guess I is a sinful woman." A little questioningly, she allowed plenty of pause for Jared to say she wasn't. Tonight he didn't. "Whut you thinkin' of, Ja'ed. *You* still wanter be Mister Lance's body-suhvant, an' keep his shoes shiny and travel wid 'im whin he goes places—hmm? Why, de place he mos'ly goes I knows of he don' want you nor nobody else goin' wid—"

"No. I done change mah mind—today. Much as I likes S'ronyuh, hit ain't no place fer—me."

"How come?"

"I wants to 'mount to sump'n. Miz Hazel, she say she want me to. Dey ain't no chance heah fer—Leah an' me." He didn't hear the low snort of disgust from inside, so sunk was he in recountal. "*She* say de bes' thing is to luhn all I kin heah—and den go no'th, up whar Mistuh Ellyutt come frum. *She* say up theah dey's lots as light-skinned as me, while heah—"

"You goner quit 'sociatin' wid—Mammy an' me?"

"Luella, you *know* I ain't! One o' de main reasons I'se goin' is 'cause *both* o' you wants me tuh 'mount to sump'n. Heah hit'll always be like hit's been since—since de Panthers ain't 'lowed to play wid me. I'm goner finish high school and I'm goner go to de college Mistuh Elv's give so much money neah Chalcedonia—an'—an'—"

"Whut you goner do *den?*"

"We-ell, aftuh I goes no'th, I ain't goner be no whitefolks' nigger—I'se goner be—white*folks!*"

"Oh, Ja'ed—do-o-on't!"

"Don't cry, Luella. I'll come back heah lots o' times, often as I—Jus' looka'theah!" His hand, long, thin and strong for a child's, was as white as Mister Lance's would have been in the light from kerosene lamp.

"Whut—whut you goner do aftuh you's—white?"

"Well," Jared slowed down, to plan as he talked. "De nex' thing

aftuh I gits me a good job an' money in de bank, I'll — git married an' build de fines' house money can buy — "

"Who you goner marry — Leah?"

"Shucks, no! Leah's goner stay right heah, wid Miz Ca'ietta sittin' on top o' her *all* her life. Don't *want* nothin' else. If she evah do, Miz Ca'ietta'll talk it out of 'er. Leah makes me sick." He spat far and accurately at a clothesline post just visible, "I'm goner marry me de pretties' and de riches' and *whitest* gal in de — Auw-w!"

He had been jerked to his feet by an ear, was engulfed in black rage, being almost dragged toward the far corner of the back yard. "I done heered all de foolish*mint* I kin stummick! Thought you had *some* sense. You ain't — but you's goner, 'caze I'se goner beat it inter yuh!" Mammy could drag and whip and talk all at the same time when she got mad. Jared had never seen her as mad as she was now, "A gran'chile o' mine talkin' like dat! I'se dis-graced by de wusstest thing dey is: a nigger whut ain't proud he is one. You's borned a nigger and you's goner stay a nigger — an' you's *goner be* proud of it!" Her free palm was smacking first one side then the other of his narrow wiggling behind as they walked. She had the strength of a million men when she was riled up. She pulled him into familiar stink. On the triple-hole seat she flung him across the part of her lap her big stomach didn't take up. His head almost went down one of the holes. *That* was where talk like his belonged, Mammy began. She timed what she said with smacks that didn't need pants down to hurt. "Heah I wukks myse'f ter death ter raise up no-'count chillun and make 'em sump'n, comes home tiahed out an' finds you talkin' — 'nathema! Goner quit bein' a nigger, is yuh?" Smack! "Goner go no'th, is yuh!" Smack! "Goner be bettuh dan yo' ole mammy and dat sweet Luella, is yuh?"

"No, Mammy, I didn't say — "

"Shet up!" Smack! "Done fergot all de upbringin' you had? Done th'owed it away? Jes' because white boys kain't play wid you, you got to let yo' big mouf run 'way wid yo' haid, ain't yuh — ?"

"No, Mammy! Don't hit so *hahd!*"

"Bout time hit's beginnin' to seep thoo dem pants! Heah's mo' o' de same!"

He burrowed his face in her skirt folds to keep quiet. He just couldn't stand many more licks — hadn't ever been lambasted like this. But that last lick hadn't hurt quite as much as the others, and — this one — even less. It sho' wasn't because Mammy was getting tired. She didn't ever get tired when she was driv by duty. He looked up sideways. The door was open a little and just enough light came in to catch the slick lines down her cheeks. Mammy was crying much as he was and when she cried she couldn't hit good.

"Ma-ammy, I'se sorry!" He twisted around and up to throw his arms around her neck, stinging pants seat almost sliding from her lap. Punishing hands were hugging-hands now. "I won't nevuh talk datter way — ag'in!"

"Don't you nevuh *think* datter way, neither!"

"N-no, Mammy! Ah don't know how come I did."

"Ah does!" She carried his long slim body with no effort outside and hunched down beside him in the cool grass under the castor bean tree close by a catawampus henhouse. "Hit's dat Miz Hazel, talkin' talk she learnt frum yo' — Nevuh mind who."

"From *Mister* Ell-yutt?"

"I said never mind! She oughter know bettuh — even if her own pappy was who he was."

"I won't wuk fer her no mo'. I'll quit tomorrer."

"No. She *mean* well. An' she *oughter* use dat money to he'p you — "

"Why?"

"Becaze — Theah you go — *always* axin' questions!" A plump hand which had been petting him raised threateningly.

"You wants us ter ax questions."

"*Some*times I does. As I was sayin' — whut was I sayin'? You done made me fergit. Now — I rekkermembers. Whut you got to learn right now is dat dere's lots you *kain't* learn — yit. Some things you kin. Fust, you's a nigger and always will be. I 'grees wid Miz Milly. Folks dat calls it 'nee-gro' makes me sick to my stummick! Second, like Mistuh Jed say, dey ain't nothin' wusser'n a bad nigger an' nothin' bettuh'n a *good* un. *You's* goner be a good one. An', third — our whitefolks *cares* whut happens to us. Don't pay no 'tenshun to Yankee-talk. All *dey* wants is to use us somehow an' make out how kindhearted *dey* is. I heered tell: just let a nigger up yonder take one tee-nincy step t'wards *real* ee-quality dey orations so much erbout and he'll find out diff'ent mighty quick!" She was rubbing all the hurt out of smarting pants seat. Jared didn't mind being held like a baby by Mammy, big as he was. "T'wont be long now befo' you'll have all de cullud gals crazy 'bout yo' pritty, light skin, an' if you wants ter sashay 'roun' some, I reckon de good Lawd'll unnerstan'. But don' you fer one second fergit what Mister Calvin Thaxton useter say: 'A nigger whut beehaves and wukks hard'll 'mount to sump'n; an' whinn he do, he's got de right to be a lot prouder dan *any* white man."

"Mammy — " This were just the time to revive another question. "My daddy was white. *Who* were he?"

"My lan', whut a question! You don' heah Luella axin' who *her* daddy was. Do Bennie ax who his'n was? Denn how come *you?*"

"You ain' nevuh tole me."

"An' dat ain't all. He's daid now. He wasn't nothin' to you an' you wasn't — much to him! We's all de fam'ly you got and all you's likely to have fer a long time to come. Fergit you ever had a — "

"Was he all white?"

"I nevuh axed 'im!"

"Ain't I nevuh goner know who he were?"

"Whut diff'ence do it make? Any mo' foolish questions on yo' mind? Nevuh seed sech a — "

"Yas'm — how kin I stop bein' a whitefolks' nigger?"

"Huh?" she bellowed angrily. "You bin listenin' to dem pestiffous schoolboys! Well, now — hit's de *easies'* thing in de worl to *stop* bein' a whitefolks' nigger. All you gotter do is jes' settle back in shiftlessness, spend mo' time thinkin' how mistreated you is an' in bein' imperdent dan you do wukkin'. An' if you's dat kind, just let me know — dat's all: jus' you let *me* know! Don't cry, honey, Mammy knows you ain't!" She was kissing him all over his frizzy head. "Whin dey calls you Whitefolks' Nigger, just you say to yo'se'f, Dey's callin' me like Mammy!"

"Dat's how I wantster be — " Small nose nuzzled deep into the folds of black neck. "Jus' 'zactly."

"Dat's Mammy's boy." Patting and loving made him forget all his troubles. She moved her lips away from his head and looked him in the eyes. "But if I evah hears you say anything — like you said to Luella — evah cotches you even thinkin' sech — 'bout *white* gals, I means, I'se goner wear yo' bottom down to de bone. You won't, will yuh, Ja'ed? Promise Mammy?"

"Ah — ah promises — promises — promises — "

"Promises — ?" Small, very black fingers were gouging at sleep-blinded eyes as Bennie crept close on all fours with the careful Luella in close pursuit. "Promises — whut?"

"You — you, Bennie, git on in ter bed, befo' I wears you out!" Chuckling, Mammy did just the opposite of her talk. She leaned forward with Jared on one side of her lap to draw Bennie up on the other, and grinned as he immediately went limp, playing dead. Just had to play-act *all* the time — dat chile!

CHAPTER 17

CALEB HONE felt shut off from the world. His office windows were closed, had to be in December. If he'd have them washed, there might not be so much difference, but people would think the *Sentinel* was making expenses. Collecting for ads and subscriptions was already slow enough. Besides, if he had them washed, Miss Nathalia would be sure she'd maneuvered him into it by one of her recent articles:

"One wondered then as one often wonders now if cleanliness being next to godliness explains the unwashed windows in our souls—and local newsrooms." By the faintest of nose-twitches at their next passing on the street, the old camel had shown what she thought of his editing it out of her copy.

It was cold here. Very yellow electric light made the inky smells and bleakness of the view through dirty windows even more depressing. The state should have its death house overlook Sironia's Court

House and Square on such a morning as this. But, then, that might take the sting from capital punishment.

It was about time to do his editorial on Capital Punishment over again. Right now he wasn't sure which side he'd take in this one. He'd sound out his — er — "constituency," learn which way current opinion was running; and then take the other. That never failed to bring in space-filling "letters."

In brief, Mister Hone was again in one of his frequent periods of disgust with all things — small towns, newspapers, scenery, and people. Particularly disgusting was his present assistant-of-all-work: fat, slovenly and a Janke. This one aged seventeen years was named Wolfgang. Had the Jankes been created to prepare Caleb for hell? It was a thought. Mrs. Janke had started bearing "helpers" for *The Sironia Sentinel* twenty years or more ago. By all accounts she was still at it. With those long noses and squint eyes as shared inheritance, Caleb did not (as he would have liked to do) contest that Papa Janke had done his legal part. Difficult it was to understand, Papa having never been missed from his hide-bottomed chair tilted back and overlooking this view. Might evolve into a feature-story yet. Lately Papa Janke had let his hair and beard grow. To many he was intimating that "folks in this town better be getting theyselves ready to meet the Messiah"; *and* that many would be surprised to learn who it was.

A loud thud behind Caleb was followed by the scattering rattle of spilled type over greasy, splintery floor.

Caleb rose. He was thinner, even taller in anger. He let the sullenly glowering, rat-faced young ox have all the words the *Sentinel* could never print, words which well up inside a literary man — same as any other — like body poisons. As Caleb admitted to himself (when it was much too late to do any good), he went "pretty far." In saying whatever rose in his mind's volcanic sputtering and seething, he had gone farther than even the third dropping of type that same week justified. He had stopped just short of intimating what *Mrs.* Janke was — besides pregnant. (But, as matters developed, he was to wish he'd said *more!*)

Wolfgang swelled about the jowls. Kinky blonde head bored like a bull's. Sweat popped suddenly from a face flabby red and then flabby white. Obviously, Wolfgang wasn't *all* vegetable. Not when he was mad — and he was mad now — but in Bohemian.

Caleb turned back to his desk with a weary, "Pick up the type, when you get time — and feel like it! All the copy's in your basket." It was a relief not to hear his "Sure! Sure! I fix him!" It had never been omitted before. The complete silence, as the oaf went sulkily on with his work, was a little — ominous.

Caleb admitted to being "nervous as a cat." His castigation of Wolf-

gang would have cleared his mind had not Mrs. Janke's untimely immunity stopped him, left resentments unexpended. He'd better get busy — at something — fast. A hell of an editorial on capital punishment he'd turn out now! Would probably end with enthusiastic applause for the guillotine and append a waiting list of Sironians therefor. Sironians — pah! Never reading anything worth reading — but the *Sentinel*. Actually preferred such gruel as Miss Nathalia's innocuous "Through the Years." Good word: innocuous. But could he use it — hah! On the corner of a thinly disguised venereal remedy circular he wrote:

castigation
catastrophic
innocuous.

What a series of "Through the Years" *he* could write. His "works" would have Brann, the Iconoclast, catalogued with the Elsie Books! It would be a real service to humanity, to make some of this town's determined beldames and their compliant sons see what they were instead of what they thought they were. This was a favorite pastime of Caleb's as with many another, possibly *every* other, small-town editor.

Caleb couldn't leave the office to Wolfgang yet. If he read the *Congressional Record*, he'd find himself finishing page after page of words with no recollection of what they said. There was that "Through the Years" *he'd* like to write. He couldn't publish it, but all the Millys and Cariettas and Nanettes in the world couldn't stop him *writing* it!

He drew a pad of ruled yellow sheets to him, licked the lead of a cedar pencil which wrote so faintly it erased easily. One thin, mottled claw held the pad steady, the other once started would write swiftly — but getting started was sometimes slow. How long, how very long it had been since he had found anything but unavoidable drudgery in setting thoughts down black on yellow. His dissertation at Hyperion College had avowed his happiest moments were those spent "with pen in hand and tongue in — "

Wolfgang had dropped something else. Or perhaps he had just knocked it off a table with his hippopotamus posterior. Why look to see? One hand still held the pad, the other had begun writing,

We do appreciate, as time lumbers by, the unremitting pure vitriol of Mrs. Lane. True, her retiring nature seldom lets her sign her letters to us and they are always left under our door at night, but while she does disguise her writing to some extent, her pet expressions are sufficient to give debit where debit is due —

even if her succession of Negro maids who deliver them didn't invariably come around later — for a dime. It is all very charming and we look forward to more. However else would we know the latest falsely malicious rumor about a former belle not entirely unrelated to the Harpy of West Fifth Street, herself? Mother-love has never blinded Mrs. Lane to a daughter's shortcomings, and we only wish once before we die we might print her statements verbatim. However, they must wait on Freedom of the Press — meaning indefinitely. Nor is Mrs. Lane's scope confined to her own flesh and blood, although she does refer frequently to her husband's limitations (to those other than mental). Whenever we hear of any one of our fellow citizens achieving or acquiring anything in the least enviable, we expect our early morning slumbers to be disturbed by the light scrape of a sealed envelope under our front door. Rarely disappointed, we are, however, not infallible. When we printed the happy news of the "tiny garments" shower given Mrs. Jed Hadyn (as blameless as she is colorless) we foretold a billet doux under our door attacking this most utterly negative of young brides. We were wrong. When it came — quite on time, fifteen minutes before the morning milk — it showed excellent taste in confining itself to roguish statements about the prospective father seeing "far too much" of the Polish redhead who at various hours presides over the depot restaurant, serving stale sweet-rolls from under glass bells and replacing them with others just as old. All this lifting of bells and buns must be tiresome, we say, so what should be more refreshing than — as our informant continues and, we are afraid, quite beyond denial — a drive with that gentleman of the Old South along that part of River Road which has come justifiably to be known as Jedediah's Delight?

That Mrs. Lane — in her chosen profession — is not thorough we would be first to deny!

Less provocative but far pleasanter are thoughts of our most devoted wife wasted on our second most unappreciative husband. To her we would say that while she may have much to do, may have reasons unknown to us, we still think it won't help matters, as she has done recently, to discontinue attendance at her husband's church. She changed her faith to his on his demand. Even a church to whose tenets she cannot fully subscribe is better than no church at all! We mean that, madame!

Here Caleb stopped — wasn't there some way he could *really* convince Moira of this? Some way that she would know was prompted by sincere liking? The answer — in a word — was "No!"

Several of you — O my readers! — have wondered not always in silence about the parentage — paternity, if you know the word — of a certain mulatto youth. Others have wondered why there should be any wonder. All one has to do is to study the right three-quarter face when the sun is red on kinked hair.

Others have been not in the least indefinite about another, this a Negress technically, quantitatively all but pure white. This child deserves sympathetic handling, something she isn't likely to get where she is. If the exquisite, *recently* blonde Botticelli who is sheltering her will try to realize that if the Old South *ever* was, it isn't any more, she might do something about having this child-flower transplanted while there is yet time. This will not happen: to unfit thoroughly a son-of-promise for the only world he'll ever know is in itself a full-time occupation. It was hoped that when this boy became acclimatized to public school all might be well. We reckoned hastily. How could it be, when the boy is made to feel he must not *want* to be like the others?

Troubles of this sort give no concern to our families on the way up. Sironia "Society" has been (by ourself, may we say) compared to a whole bank of side-by-side, slow-moving elevators. Those which were at the top floors in 1860 are gliding, not always imperceptibly, down — those which have not already reached the basement. Those that started in the basement or below — are ascending.

Sironia changes in other ways. This is well. But is it going as they'd want who once determined its course? Would Calvin Reardon Thaxton approve the results of, for and by the people of Sironia that he fought so long and so valiantly to establish? Would he admit that the brand of democracy which worked so well when he was here did so not so much because it was democracy as because it was a benevolent (Thaxton) despotism? What would he think of the aldermanic rows in the City Rooms of the Court House, of the private conversations held individually and most often just before the quarterly award of contracts?

He would find Main Street still running from the dingy Square the same old mile-and-a-half to Reardon's Pasture. Except that its structures are older and *more* dingy, he would see little change these six years in our business district. He might even agree with those of us who believe any such change can be wrought only by an earthquake of the San Franciscan or more recent Sicilian variety. He might even see a hidden threat in financial conditions generally — in a sort of moral let-down. There was never a time when his brand of integrity was more needed.

His like Sironia will hardly see again. Certainly Nature's well-

known, distorted sense-of-humor was never more in evidence than when she gave this man the son she did. To make it all the more macabre, she gave that son his father's impressive appearance, courtliness and great heart — in short, everything — to outward appearances. Of the rest, there should be only silence. Of what is in store for him — more silence. In this home we do find the very antithesis of Mrs. Lane's mother-love. In this instance, it is as unwaveringly beautiful as it is blind — not to say lugubrious. Has she succeeded in convincing herself that her son — as labeled some weeks back, and not in charity — *is* "The Catch of Sironia"? Or is she full well aware of bitter truth, of what admitting it will lose for him — once and for all time? Is it possible she knows and still believes that, even so, he is still "The Catch"? Be that as it may or may not, we can tell when our sympathy is not wanted. We know, too, that where some may condemn, others condone, and many scoff, we — admire.

"Phew!" Caleb rocked back on the hind legs of his chair, with only an uncaring look Janke-ward. The old therapy was working. He felt better already. Perhaps, it was assurance gained from the troubles of others — not a flattering admission. Suppose he and Miranda *had* had a son (it was around this that his moments of gloom, his feeling of the futility of being Caleb Hone most often eddied) who had turned out another Lance Thaxton? Or a girl, another Laurine Lane? Making the most of negative comforts, he again sat forward, applied newly sharpened lead to insatiable yellow.

Of another, *who* can write with certainty?

Most of us know that accident of birth does not confer lasting exemption from responsibility. We have one who apparently disagrees. Hill-born, handsome, likable and, above all, passionately lovable, he has used all those gifts prodigally. Now, after years of abusing them, they are leaving him. What was raffish and attractive in a youngster becomes ugly, fetid, cheap. Some would say our reaction here is poorly disguised sex-envy. Perhaps. Certainly, that emotion can beget more unfairness, more blind cruelty than any other. Consider our Southland's sacrosanct "Unwritten Law": A man finds his wife *in flagrante delicto*. There is no need to learn if the sinners are *equally* to blame, for "The Unwritten Law" is more plain than most written ones on a husband's "rights." He kills the other man (unless, of course, it's Jed Hadyn.). This removes not only all stain (from his honor) but a successful rival as well. But does he shoot the bitch who is equally guilty? Why should he, when he can believe all her heart-wrench-

ing details about being forced into compliance; can rise to new heights by forgiving her just before the Grand Jury meets to "no bill" him; and not have to go to all the trouble incident to finding a new bed-partner. Simple — so far. But little in the way of scientific research has been done, on two other important phases. First, does such a husband feel that having put the fear of God into his wife is sufficient to prevent a recurrence, or does he make an honest effort to improve his own performances? Second, do these most fortunate of wives (How *can* a woman know a man loves her if he doesn't kill another over her?) do their bit by teaching their once-more honorable husband some of the dead men's tricks?"

Returning, more specifically, to Jed Hadyn, what shall we say of his allowing the Thaxton farm acres to run themselves, inspecting them only as he feels the need of hunting, or trying out a new saddle colt? Of course, "his niggers are devoted to him"! They trail along after him in devotion indistinguishable from that of his blooded hounds, but who ever saw slaves who didn't trail after a keeper who most of the time let them do as they please; let them "tote" away whatever they want — unless it is something of genuine importance, such as a favorite bridle, a bottle of whiskey or, in one case, we believe, a well-tied fishing fly?

What shall we say of the spectacles not infrequently provided of the essential humanity of this aristocrat who can, wild-drunk and whooping, race the full length of our chief thoroughfares singing songs which we stupidly law-abiding peasants deplore even as we try to catch all the words? Certainly, one touch of rotgut makes the whole world kin — but don't any of you Skating Rink Ward-ers, fellows with whom Lord Jed hobnobs so ingratiatingly when drunk, go calling at Hadyn Manor! Hill Family womenfolk, suh, carry the double load of gentility. They damn well have to!

Does this Hill Family gentleman of whom we speak *welcome* his wife's poor health because it leaves him more free for research? Or does he view fatherhood as another wall closing in on him? It couldn't be less of a secret that he married to get himself out of one of the uncounted messes he has got himself into. No one would deny that he finally chose his wife for the "good of the family." Nor could *he* deny that he has been heartily and robustly sick of his one noble demonstration for a long time. There is more than a little irony in the fact that it is marriages of this kind which endure.

Of this Hadyn apotheosis of inconsistency, how can we show our condemnation when even as we tell how we disapprove of

him we are — secretly — applauding, eagerly awaiting full account of his next shenanigans? For it is lamentably true that, despite his flamboyantly displayed faults, we would — except when they are our homes he has involved — not have him in any particular different! Why is this? He is good company when sober, even when only partly drunk. So are a lot of people we don't give a damn about. Is it because he lives as he wants to with well-nigh total disregard of the so-called "conventions" — as we wish we could? Partly. But we believe it is *chiefly* due to two other reasons. First, the man seems possessed of some sort of magic lantern by which he can project on the drab screen of our lives much of the color and high excitement of his own. Second, those of us who knew him as the wildest and sweetest-tempered youngster of his day still see that young Byron in tragic perspective. As unlovely as many of his aspects now are, the sentimental among us actually enjoy looking on him as victim of Hill Family demands on its own. We can wish an anachronism might see to what extent the peremptory demands on him back in 1900 are responsible. But she never will, wouldn't if someone told her — and who on earth *or off* would dare?

Again Caleb's chair was back on its hind legs. Then with a thud it was again on all four. He was, as he had so often accused others, spending too many words on the Hill Family Oligarchy. One would think there were few others in this town, when there were over twenty thousand of them, some said twenty-five.

Deliberately he centered his thoughts on those others. To bring them to mind, he had to make a store-to-store canvass of Main Street and a house-to-house visualization of Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Streets. Even so, he didn't find anything he'd devote this temporary freedom of his to. They were people, in many cases fine people, worthy people, the kind that build up a place without taking any, much less *all* the leading dramatic roles. The trouble with them — for writing purposes — was they behaved themselves. They raised intelligent, upstanding, conscientious children — all with the same virtues, the same pitifully uninspired vices. But he'd write about them. He did write about them, resisting the constant pressure in the back of his mind. He wrote truthfully and banally about the opening of new businesses, about fine wives and children, about class valedictorians and college degrees.

Conventions and luncheon clubs. And all the time — all the damn time there was that same push and shove back toward *them*. Hell — might as well give in —

Himself, as aloof as his great home up there on the Bluff, he

looks down on us from the heights, literally and figuratively. Were our valley still the woodland of sprawling, low-banked river and overflow-matted underbrush, peopled only by an occasional copper body taut with bent bow and flint-tip arrow, this desiccated satyr up yonder, we feel, would be just exactly as he *is*. This, quite naturally, however subtly and indirectly, infuriates us. What manner of god does he think he is? The answer comes back from his sheer wall of limestone that, perhaps, he is some kind of a god — 50 per cent, as a guess. Of that other 50 per cent (or 60 per cent, if he has lately passed you on the street and given no indication of seeing either it or you) we can but speculate. There must be laws which could be invoked against him. Why aren't they? Allowing for the loose-mouthed, filthy-eyed exaggerations of River Road, he is — at times — unmistakably evil in act, thought and influence. Yet, for all the big talk from what are by custom referred to as 'irate parents,' there is not one scintilla of evidence that he has ever "sought out young maidens" and debauched them. On the contrary, it has been proven time and time again that those "young maidens" have mounted those heights alone and afoot for the sole and avowed purpose of being *further* "debauched" — on a cash basis. Why he hasn't been killed (at least, once) when in parental boast and bombast he must have "died like a dawg" fifty times — we can only surmise.

In doing so, should we consider the number of times the business of such a young maiden's father has been so saved? The anomaly — and let who will read something soothing and beautiful into it — is that the scorn, the vituperation, the condemnation to hell's deepest regions come from practically all who know "what goes on up there" except — and I underscore it — *except* those whom he has in this delectable way "injured irreparably," from whom he has taken life's greatest boon — "honor," and their families. Those who have most reason to talk, to take punitive measures, are strangely silent, inactive — complacent and content.

Of the other 50 per cent of Young Tom Bly, we wish we could write scientifically, definitively and then spread it in all directions and without limit. To dismiss this "percentage" of him as "a slave to his conscience" does not suffice. A being (we dare not say "man" here) as vile as he is at times *made out* to be would not be troubled by conscience. That he is two men in one might come nearer the truth. The plea of moral insanity would be an easy way out and only that. Our man (or men) is not insane. He is not all vile on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays — angelic

on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays — the Seventh Day being reserved for resting.

We have watched him plan for the City's weal with a Board of our citizens — at his own expense invariably. Sometimes it's been to save a landmark about to be wrecked. Many, many times it's been the bolstering of a family reduced to the irreducible. We have seen him, as gray and impassive as old limestone, no warmth in eye or voice, correct these things and — even in their very righting — allow his eye to be caught by one of our very young daughters passing outside the window — not to say repassing. What his slight, stern nod means through a window is always quite plain. A young girl seen strolling these days in the dusk with the utmost in aimlessness across the South Wagon Bridge and turning right, is sooner or later referred to as having become a member of "The Reardon's Bluff Walking Club." Perhaps, he has used *economic pressure*. Some five others of our really respected citizens come most readily to mind here as having done so. Who can say for certain that any man won't do anything? In this instance, we don't believe *he* has ever had to.

We could never be close friends with the man, as much as we would like a chance to figure out what came to him from one side of his family and what from the so-different other. It is a favorite theory of ours that if these things could be known they would surprise everyone but ourselves. We do know that he could not have committed all the abominations he is said to have, for lack of time. We know for a fact that a recent titillating scandal ("canard" as Miss Carietta would say) with which he had *no* connection, once it reached Sironia was altered permanently to make him the protagonist! After all, he's ours for so long as he lives. One "man" of him has committed a big percentage of our outrages, the other has done more actual good than any other now living here, and we have yet to find a way to throw out or destroy one 50 per cent without doing the same thing to the other, and how we need that other 50 per cent. And who has been *lastingly* hurt by him? Name one.

Now for Sironia's unsolved mystery! The still beautiful, but not so much so, damsel with the patrician nostrils, the neatly spaced teeth and the heart of the Inquisition's Iron Maiden — what *has* become of her? Not that anyone — except possibly dear Mrs. Lane — would grieve if she never came back! Frankly, we were wrong about this Flower of the Oldest South (professionally speaking). We did not think there was enough money in Sironia to buy her off so long. It has been almost four months now since

that September 9 of her last (so far as we know) visit. She was never one to hide her light if it was becoming. It is our theory that she could not slip out of Sironia unseen. We just do not understand. Is foul play too much to hope for? How about it, Marshall?

Does it appear we again deal too much with details better left to those immediately concerned? Very well—

According to our last census, we are almost evenly divided, white and black. The latter include, of course, all the innumerable gradations, however slight, in shading. Using the Grand Duchess Nathalia's old stand-by, the fabric of our social pattern, woven from the white warp and the black woof, she consistently begs the question. Just as in all well-woven cloth (we'd add) the one does reinforce the other, but *just* so long as the "woof" is content to be told by the warp "I know best. *You* do what *I* say, and all will be well." As convinced as we are that the situation is basically unfair (on this point we rest our case on the Bible and the Constitution), we can still admit that never in our travels have we seen, day in and day out, less conflict or more peaceable acceptance of the regional *status quo* than is the case here. If it could stay that way, leaving aside the question of human rights and other fundamentals, it would make for tranquillity and, perhaps, as much ease of spirit as any conglomeration of mankind is ever likely to achieve over a period of years.

Will it, *should* it stay this way? With education of the Negro on the increase, how *can* it? What is education if not the means to question what is; make what is what should be? We, ourselves, are never believed by Southerners when we say we do not approve of miscegenation; that we think it as bad for one color as for the other. Nor, in all sincerity, do we think practical the *social* intermingling of the colors, not that one should feel inferior to the other, but both would be lost in a third which could be less admirable than either. We believe that the question on which all future racial planning should be predicated is: How can we so rearrange our civilization as to achieve shared commercial and governmental rights, and yet reserve, keep individual to each color those rights which are personal? If I am told it cannot be done, I would not, at this time, argue—certainly not with a subscriber. I would, however, ask what should be said to a white thread which has just stated to a black one, "Of course, you do as much to hold the fabric together as I do, to make it a fabric! You have as much to do with the pattern resulting as I. But can't you get it through your damn obstinate fiber that I am the Warp?" What might be said to that by the Planning

Thinker? I do not know. But as to the woof, itself, its answer — at *this* time, in *this* place, anyway — had better be, "Yessuh, yessuh — I gits it thoo mah fiber — "

In exasperation, Caleb slammed the pencil down to spring testily to his feet. It was always the same, when he tried to tackle this enigma. If he didn't feel so strongly, he might make some progress. As it was, he invariably ended in the same mess of thought he now was. The fact was, for all his flat statements, he knew what should be but couldn't make up his own mind how it could be achieved. He could never agree with the attitude so general down here that the Negro remains a child so long as he is treated as one, becomes something which is anything but childlike if given a chance to assert himself, something ferocious, something elemental there is no controlling. Yet, it was himself he blamed most. By this time *he* should have decided what was best, no matter whether anyone agreed with him. He was irked more than he liked to admit by his indecision. What ordinarily was only a petty annoyance now loomed into a last straw: Wolfgang Janke, by the garlic breath down his neck, was unmistakably reading over his shoulder again!

"Goddam Bohunk! I told you *never* to do that."

"*Them* sheets ready to be set up, Mi-ister Hone?"

"All the copy's in, and you know it!" In this unusual display of temper, Caleb had pounded his desk, even kicked an open drawer. Now he tore the yellow sheets four ways across and stuffed them in his crowded wastebasket. "Maybe *you've* been here long enough, Wolfgang?"

"Maybe! Firing me?"

This — from a Janke and hopefully — was a surprise. "Talk like you want to be fired. Why?"

"Old man von't let me quit! You fire me. I join the Navy and," he added importantly, "see the vorld!"

"Hmm!" This *was* unexpected. Nothing Caleb'd like better than to kick the fool out butt-last right now, but there was a paper to be got out, and after this one, another and another — Training a printer — especially another Janke — was hard work, took time. He'd have to crawfish as best he could. "Well, I'm sure your father has your best interests at heart — and for his sake I'm going to give you still another trial." His forgiving smile would have fooled nobody, not even a Janke. He'd better get out before he kicked the immemorial piss out of the stupid, staring and — yes, grinning imbecile.

He snatched up worn brown overcoat and drab felt hat of no pronounced color, and stomped down the narrow worn stairs. It would take him longer than usual to walk this off, possibly the rest of this

dismal afternoon, but he must before he again had to face Wolfgang. Not yet was he admitting it was his own uncertainty at which he was maddest.

He struck out along the Square, then turned east on Junk Street, still in fury. Most people here thought him "a froze-up Yankee" who never revealed feelings. When he tried to — unbend, be like those "you-alls" down here always strewing their feelings about like flower-girls at a lawn wedding, he felt and *was* — fatuous. But, damn it, he did like most of them all the while their open display of feeling repelled him. He caught himself mumbling aloud as long, angry strides thudded across the South Wagon Bridge into the Skating Rink Ward. There were no cooing, magnolia-draped holdovers from the Civil War in this part of town.

Of East Sironia's early thrown-together huts and cabins, few were left. Now there were ten or twelve low "stores" and many all-alike, neat little boxes of "railroad green" houses built for the "shop" workers. Practically all the railroad labor had been "brought in," and when a railroad brings in labor, in so far as nationality is concerned, it plays no favorites. When he wasn't running for office (every other year), Judge Oscar Rogan was known to refer to this as the Noah's Ark Ward, "two of everything." Damn if he wasn't just about right — for once. Should some Carnegie or Sage want to choose a race of immigrants to encourage, he would have to look far to find a better sample-room.

Never had a river been more clearly a dividing line between two — yes, civilizations. One was trying to hold back the clock, the other trying to push it forward by every means at its command — and succeeding. Someday a "Civil War" — an unexciting one of ballots — for once. Should some Carnegie or Sage want to choose a race of markable disregard of the other. The Skating Rink Ward sent its own Alderman to the weekly meetings in the Court House.

Take the railroad-green Kolchak house there! Its yard was as bare of trash and junk as it was of grass. These Polack-Italians had a genius for making a place look clean, in repair and not lived in. Next door, the Rasczik's was a perfect example of a period that might be called the "Early White-Trash." Everything seemed to sag with an easy, somnolent unconcern, from the ridge line of the old five-room shack to the five ramshackle structures in the littered yard. (Six if *that* one held up until Caleb had passed by.) When one of the Rasczik's henhouses got blue-bugs in it, it was said, they got together all loose junk in the yard plus additions from the railroad lumber dump to build another, let the blue-bugs have the first one. Once they had used such to shelter in all humanity a stray nanny goat, its owner alleged, until long after he had given up looking for it.

Over there was Policeman Timkins' five-year-old Doris, one of

Caleb's favorites. All her attention was on herding an industrious tumblebug and his burden. Caleb leaned over the neat green picket fence. "How's my sweetheart?"

"Just fi-ine!" She flung back pigtails from a face that looked like a pretty Jap's without interrupting her work or looking at him. "What you bring me?"

"Ah, woman, woman!" Caleb apostrophized. Hands lifted in futility came down and into his side pocket. In a lean white palm, he extended three large gum drops, one green, one pink and one yellow.

Doris left the tumblebug to his profession and skipped to the fence. Possibly the prettiest child of her age in town, she was certainly the most unusual looking. That Japanese tilt to eyes and slick, blue-black hair line! Smudges of quick tears, smears of breakfast egg, a powdering of the good earth were all there. All belonged there: dirt became Doris. Nothing would ever suit her as well as these tiny faded overalls. Very much cut down, very much sewed up in front, they had a quickly collapsible seat added. Just the way they waddled when she walked touched Caleb's innerness. He had told himself he came this way to avoid people, but he had known all the time it was to see Doris. More than once — far more often than once — he'd considered trying to adopt her with Miranda's co-operation (*not* a foregone conclusion). But would what they could give her equal what the transplanting would take away. Hardly. Doris was, he had to admit, indigenous to *East* Sironia.

"Where's Mama?"

"Her gone! I got *new* shoes."

"Where?"

"I don't know. You know?"

"Well — no. You keeping busy, Doris?"

"Um-hmmh! What's 'keeping busy'?"

This exchange continued, could go on as long as he had to stay. He nearly always overstayed. As usual, there was nobody home to interrupt them. Mothers in the neighborhood had grown used to the tall, skin-and-bones old Yankee leaning over the railroad-green fence. It gave a certain sheen to their lackluster days, took a little of the backache out of nose-wiping and diaper-washing that Mister Hone would sure like to have kids like theirs.

He overstayed this morning, too. It was now almost dinnertime. He should stop by the *Sentinel* on his way home, but dinner would set better if he didn't have to look at Wolfgang's rebellious glower just before.

He reached his home on South Hadyn without seeing a single Janke. Miranda was away. For the time he was the head of the house.

This thought persisted through lunch. Before she had left to address

some of Hazel's mill girls, Miranda had set out his lunch — cold, but adequate. He did not remove his coat.

Miranda had been a schoolteacher when he'd married her in Vermont, and while she hadn't taught school in thirty years, she was still a schoolteacher. She cooked like one, too. The bakery pie was sliced so that two pieces could be added to three pieces to make five-eighths of a pie.

The wall thermometer stood at sixty-two degrees — colder than outside. Every chair in varnished white pine kitchen had its place and knew it. When Caleb started to move the small table which held his lunch nearer a window for better light, it all but warned, "T-t-t! Better put me back!"

Like a half-folded ruler his spareness remained seated in a dim corner. Perfunctorily he said the same blessing he always said when eating alone, could not have recollected its phrasing if suddenly asked for it *away* from table. After slicing cold, tasteless mutton, he broke off a corner of faintly brown but very stiff cold toast. Recently acquired blue-white teeth went to work mechanically. How would it be if Doris — some cleaner, and fittingly dressed, of course — sat there opposite him? The kitchen would be warm — and — bright — personal! There would be warm milk for her and hot tea for himself. Under a metal bell there would be hot toast which had been buttered, one of countless "wastes" Miranda could never condone. Doris would spill something in her eagerness, probably damson plum jam, and instead of being considered a "mess," it would look bright red and pretty on her clean white dress. He had to laugh. At least it would pass for a laugh in Vermont. It took a daydream to get Doris in a clean dress.

He finished quickly. He washed the large plate, the small plate, the knife and fork, even the unused spoon. These were replaced in their rightful places in the kitchen-safe with tin panels punctured in eight-pointed stars.

In Miranda's and his room, he at last took off his coat, let down dingy white suspenders and lay along his side of the black walnut bed with battlemented, six-foot headboard. He did not turn the covers back, but drew up knitted "afghan" of all colors, in wide bands. He remembered Miranda's dry, incisive comments woven into it as they had sat, interminably, of evenings. "Ker-choo-oo!" He never had liked the thing, it tickled his nose. Poor Miranda, she didn't know that she was — like she was. Or — did she know and think *he* didn't? Did she want — even long for the — the home warmths she'd never admitted to him existed? Did she think Caleb as much of a — a — why *ask?* Why — anything — ? He slept, rigid, intermittently snoring, occasionally twitching under the bright-hued covering so unlike Miranda — so unlike him.

The biscuit of gold watch had been sinking a dent in his groin for some time. He rolled over. Hair of cornsilk white wisped out over a band of lavender. Suspenders dangling, he swung shoeless feet out into the room's chill mustiness. Well, back to the salt mines — no, reading proof was *worse* than any salt mine. Three o'clock! He was on his way to "the plant" in four minutes.

"Good afternoon, Postmaster!" Caleb greeted Stacey Lane in front of Hazel Elliott's.

The dumpy little man bobbed his round head and hurried past as if in consternation. Abruptly he turned and came back. "Mister Hone, you'd better not — " He swallowed the rest, if indeed there had been any "rest."

"Better not?" It went against the grain, but Caleb put out a long arm and rested a sallow hand on plump shoulder. It was trembling. "What d'you mean, Postmaster?"

"This — !" He reached under too-heavy overcoat and from a hip pocket drew out a rolled newspaper. Brownish-white pulp was unmistakable. "That — !" A stubby forefinger pointed where the paper had been folded — dated today —

Good God! There — on the front page:

> We do appreciate as time lumbers by the unremitting, pure vitriol of Mrs. Lane. True, her retiring nature seldom lets . . .

The stupid idiot! No, it couldn't be stupidity. Why, he'd get his cane and break every bone in — but already he knew there'd be no Wolfgang there to break every bone in. Long gone "to see the vorld."

"You wrote it didn't you, Mister Hone?"

"Of course, I did, but just for — just as an — exercise. Left it torn up and in my wastebasket. What'm I to do?"

"By next month, it'll be — blow over. I'd suggest you do — the usual thing."

Caleb consulted his watch and nodded. Lane was right. Given a little time, all this would blow over — be as though it had never been.

Both Caleb and compassionate Stacey Lane were one day to be again in agreement, that neither had ever been more mistaken.

Jed Hadyn's dark eyes glowed as large, girlish hips maneuvered expertly around behind the lunch counter. It was nine o'clock. The woman turned off the Depot Lunch's No. 1 Switch which controlled the wall lights near eight small tables and every alternate light in low tin ceiling. Della Kolchak knew she was being watched. She

exaggerated every move, especially her breathing under tight white uniform. Had plenty to exaggerate with! Jed didn't like skimpy women. Just get an eyeful of the way she tossed a coarse brown lock of hair out of dark Italian-looking eyes, then smiled at him sassy-like. Her skin was more the Dago in her than the Polack. As far as he could see, it was mighty pretty. What was she holding out for?

Now she had the tables' menus for tomorrow. She *could* go around the lunch counter end away from the stool on which he sat. Whatcher bet she didn't come around this end, between a table and him, have to *push* through? Sure enough! One of his thick, smooth hands ran from an oscillating hip over and along her spine with fingertip pressure —

"Mis-ter Jed Hadyn, you stop!" The Polack-accented tones were deep, and she flashed her eyes as furiously as she could — while smiling. "I — *hate* you!"

His legs swung out and their ankles locked to draw her in, gave her some pretty accurate ideas. "I hate you, too, su-ugar!" He kept his hands off, but looked up at her from under lowered brows. No need to say much. Watch her squirm like she can't get loose when all she'd have to do was prize his knees apart, *knowing* he wouldn't insist.

"Jus' because a girl is — *po*lite to you, you the kind always — acting ba-ad!"

"Don't want me to act ba-ad — do you?"

"Most certainly not, Mis-ter Jed Hadyn!" She swung around, gave and got a damn good feel. "Let go of me no-ow!"

He loosened the vise of his legs, didn't put a hand on her. This kind of "hating" was one of the best parts. Rough, placid face moved until breath stirred the little curls at slightly dirty nape. If it were entirely clean, it wouldn't be Della Kolchak's. She smelled jus' right — all Della! He sure wasn't in any hurry — no hurry at all. "Go on, Della, darling — hate me some more. Please, ma'am!" She stomped a foot to show she thought he was still holding her, shook herself to bring contact where there had been none.

"It just breaks my heart in leetl-a pieces to have *my* Della hate me. But it's kind of nice, too!"

"O-ooh!" She waved the menus wildly, twisted against everything he had. "Maze'll be here — any minute. She see me like thees with a married man! Wot she t'ink, you t'ink?"

"Same thing Maze'd think if we were playing parcheesi with four tables between us. Maze's got a dirty mind!"

"Wot *you* got?"

"Come back of the counter and I'll — "

"O-ooh! Mister Jed — hone-y." She was messing up the menus

something terrible, trying to keep her hands off him. "Dat Mister Hone — he right 'bout you!"

He sat back, elbows on the counter behind him. "Been wondering how long it'd be before *that* got into the conversation —" He had played her a very low trick by freeing her. Just for that, she'd stay! For a moment his thoughts had left the scene: How much longer could they keep the Caleb Hone "débâcle" from poor Trina — in her condition?

"I t'ink so I did good to wait thees long to ask you. *I* don' gossip ver' good."

"No-o?" He bent forward and looked into her averted eyes. "What do you do ver' good, Della?"

"I —" she had bowed her head, tucking it down against his breast as if he were forcing her to, "I — don' know — Ooh! You damn —"

"Just a leetl-a bite — won't even show unless — Why, hello, Maze — you're just in time. I was 'bout to give in!"

"Too bad about *you!*" Maze-the-blonde, Maze-the-buxom, not to say bovine, wasn't interested in the goings-on of anybody else in the world, not with all she had of her own to keep lined up. "Della! Can't you let go of him long enough to check the cash?" Very businesslike, Maze — at times like this. "Left the counter in a dee-lightful — mess, I must say."

"I feex eet, Maze — now." Della could turn out the work. Jed enjoyed the frequency and force with which she bumped his elbows off the counter with polishing rag.

"Don't want to rush anybody," Jed spoke exclusively to the ceiling's fancy tin squares only slightly rusted through yellowish white paint, "but it's after eight and a certain party had better hurry — if she wants *me* to take her — home."

"What make you t'ink anybuddy *go* wit you?"

"You know I can't come right out and say — a thing like — What — what is it, Jared?"

"Marse Jed!" Low, boyish whisper came from outside on the station platform. "I got a mes-suage fer yuh. Hit's frum Miz *Milly!*"

He slid off the stool and took the note. He continued on out into growing chill of brick platform. "Still making lots of money at Miss Hazel's?"

"No, suh. Not since dis af'noon."

"She fire you?"

"No, suh! She want me mo'n evuh — but Miz Ca'ietta done sont Mammy wuhd I bettuh quit — fer a time, anyhow —"

"Bound for —! What'd Miss Hazel have to say to that?"

"Didn' *say* much —"

"Miss Carietta — give any reason?"

"She say hit ain't — fittin'!"

"Hmm!" Jed patted the narrow, muscular shoulders in the remains of his own childhood overcoat. "Le's see if I can guess what's in this note. They're having Cousin Nathalia over for another family pow-wow!"

"How'd yuh know?"

"Been expecting it all afternoon. That's —" He had almost added that was why he hadn't gone directly home. He'd missed on one thing though. "I was sure the note would be from Miss Carietta, instead of —"

"Hit *are!* She got Miz Milly to hol' de meetin' at *her* house, becaze Miz Ca'ietta jus' had her par-luh carpets cleaned."

"How'd you know where to find me?"

"Miz Trina!" He waited, then blurted, "I heard Mammy tell Josie Miz Trina bin watchin' dis heah lunch-rume outer dat attic winder up yonduh evuh since de newspaper come out sayin' —"

"Hmm! That explains — Never mind. You drive my rig across to the barn and water the mare. I'll be home in a minute." He stuck his head back in the lunch room, almost bumped that of olive skin and smoldering dark eyes. "Some other time, Della darling. G'night, Maze!" He shut the door quickly — just quickly enough — these Polacks, once they'd made up their minds!

Jed climbed Hadyn Hill slowly. God knew he hadn't wanted to hurt Trina. That — whatever-it-was had same as said all Trina had to do was look out the old attic's east window and she'd see for herself. Obviously, she had. There wasn't one damn thing anybody could do about it.

He went in the back door, smiling at Mammy's glum show of disapproval. The narrow front hall had been musty since the day it was built. "Trina! Aren't you all ready *yet?*" he called up the narrow stair well. "I'm getting *mighty* tired waiting!"

"Jed!" Trina's calm was tinged just a little with — something. "Aren't you going to wash up first?"

"Sure!" Three at a time the stair steps were taken. He gave Trina the careful embrace she was obviously expecting. Why the *hell* must she wear brown, when it took what little color she had and made the little freckles fairly jump out from thin cheeks. She was looking — healthier, a little. "Jed — I want to go with you-all tonight."

"You got no business worrying about —"

"But I'm *not* worrying! Some of the things Mister Hone said were bad, but he didn't mean for them to get out. It was — was silly of Cousin Nathalia to try hiding the *Sentinel* from me. I'd already read Moira's copy. Jed, I — I'm not letting what it said about *you* bother me —"

What did concern her, Trina went on as he washed splashily, was

the paper's "same as accusing Marshall Lipscomb of doing away with that Garrick woman. Moira's nearly distracted." The more she protested — the more, Trina had decided, she believed it! And what was more, Trina was sure Cousin Milly believed it, too. She was going out of her way all over town "to repudiate this monstrous imputation," convincing nobody. Most awful of all was how a few words never meant to see print could make folks doubt those they loved most.

Had Moira and Cousin Milly, Jed inquired through shaving lather, thought of *asking* Marshall if he'd murdered the lady in cold blood?

Trina became quite provoked. "Levity about something as serious as that is out of — "

"You women! Hoping he did do away with P. Garrick — just so you all can 'stand by' him, the closer the better! If you want my opinion, Miss Patsy got all she could out of him and moved on to better pickings — "

"If money's all she's after — she'd be back at Syringa."

"Hardly! I think the reason she let go of *him* was she found out he'd rather enjoy using her as a target for all those old pistols of — "

"You — you don't suppose he would — *did*, do you? Why, I — I really believe he — Those eyes like gray — marbles! If Mister Bly hadn't bought the *Sentinel*, I'd write it a letter right this minute — unsigned, of course, suggesting — "

"*Now* you're infringing on Mrs. Lane's prerogatives!" He drew her closer, talking all the time, "What's anything old Hone's got to say matter? The town's one-man Greek chorus — only he's not a Greek and can't sing." He kept talking: about things in no way connected with the Hone fiasco or with what he, himself, was doing. Nor was Trina insisting that he stop anything.

Jared had changed the mare from the buggy to the carriage with flaring fenders and yellow-striped wheels. From Mister Jed's care in helping her in, it seemed like Miss Nathalia was pregnant, too.

Gladly Jed yielded the conversation to her, for in addition to the family hurt, she had been injured — well, professionally. Her material had been "literally ripped out by *that* Janke to make place for — *that!*" It was as if she was applying every biting sentence as another lash across the thin back of Caleb Hone. The latter had left on the 3.15. On the stairway door to *The Sironia Sentinel* — in Postmaster Lane's handwriting, some insisted — fluttered;

"Publication temporarily suspended. All advertising and subscriptions will be extended when we resume. The Editor."

Other vehicles were seen to be hitched in the lighted part of Thaxton Hill's front driveway. Identified in the chilly darkness were the equipages of Miss Carietta, Mister Lane and Marshall Lipscomb. Not

for an instant did any of the new arrivals wonder if either Moira or Nanette was inside.

They took the three vacant chairs in the hearth semicircle. Tiny grate fire did very little to remove front parlor's November-to-May chill. Half of the gas burners were dimly hissing. Old blues and golds looked tawdry; the eight present, so many just-"risen" corpses. Directly beneath the chandelier, Miss Milly was in tight-waisted full-skirted black, her curling hair all white now. Mister Lance, Chesterfieldian in repose, sat between the Hadyn Hill party and the hearth. Directly opposite him was Stacey Lane, Marshall and — Miss Carietta. Too late Miss Milly had realized that in putting Carietta on her left she had also put her next to a Lipscomb. Well, Carietta would just have to endure it.

There were the seemingly unavoidable rustlings of fill-in talk, wax-dummy smiles, killing glare from above, and spine-twitching cold from behind. The room, Jed mused silently, might be quite comfortable — up along the ceiling.

"A-hem!" Jed had smiled the last imbecile smile he was going to. He'd do his part to get them started, and if they *wouldn't* start, they could damn well rust to their chairs, for all he cared. "Are all *we* — injured parties present or accounted for, Aunt Milly?"

"Let me see." She frowned at Jed's unsuitable wording, then looked all about her vaguely. "I do believe — yes, I'm sure. Poor Nanette couldn't come, of course. And Moira — " she looked helplessly at Marshall and a little indignantly. *He* should offer *some* excuse. "— couldn't very well leave Tam, of course — "

"Then we are all here." Jed broke his vow not to help. They'd be here all night if he didn't. "Aren't we?"

"Ye-es, I do believe — we are. Isn't that fin — I mean — " She cleared her throat daintily and made one of the thousand exquisite, helpless gestures which made Marshall smile without knowing it. "We are met here this evening to — but, gracious, this isn't a town meeting!" Feebly she smiled, was about to try again when —

"Cousin Milly means something *has* to be done about this!" Velvety tones, barely audible, took control. With a generous display of graceful white hands, Miss Carietta drew from the purple sewing bag on her gray silk lap a copy of the all-too current last issue of the *Sentinel*. "The only question — and the question that we alone can decide — is what is to be done. If my father, Brigadier General Cunctatus Cawthorne Cahoon, were alive — " She laughed softly. "— there would be no *need* for discussion. I was only a child at the time, but — once when Mother's name was just *mentioned* in the paper — and in the *sweetest* way — I remember Fa-a-ather without a word taking down his overseer's whip from over the mantel in his office — "

"We remember, Carietta!"

"I — *I* do-on't, Mo-other. What'd he do with — ?"

"Launcelot!" Miss Milly beamed on the others. "He's making fun of the lot of us, the rapscallion!" She smiled at Mister Lance and he smiled back. The beauty of the exchange was lost on no one. "Of course, what was printed about — the Thaxtons was too absurd to mention, except for — for a perfectly lovely tribute to — " She choked. "It would never have occurred to me to — even notice the — thing if Cousin Carietta here hadn't resented being referred to as an anach- — as she was, and suggesting we ought to — "

"Why, Cousin Milly! However did you get that impression?" Instead of rising, the low voice sank to a syrupy murmur that had Mister Lane rapt, transported. "I do try to keep alive the 'tender grace of a day that is dead' — Tennyson! — to the poor best of my ability, and it isn't always easy!" She knew where to look for sustaining adoration. "But somebody simply must preserve a memory of the — old ways. By referring to me as an 'anachronism,' Mister Hone was paying me one of the very *nicest*, if quite subtle, compliments I've ever received. However — "

"Well!" Miss Milly was not aware she had spoken.

" — I do feel that some of his remarks about — others merit rebuke. Now — what I was going to suggest was 'a punishment to fit the crime' — *The Mikado!*" She paused for emphasis, eyes aswim. That pause was her mistake.

"Glad to hear Cousin Carietta feels complimented, in which case, it seems to me," Jed got in hurriedly, "those of us who *don't* feel complimented should be heard from. Don't you think so — Mister Lane?"

Rosy little-pig face went gray under the gaze of the man who had determined the course of his daughter's life. It was all water-over-the-dam, he knew, but at times like this it seemed to be rushing back the other way. He had feared that sooner or later he would have to say something, although he would have much preferred just to sit and admire Miss Carietta. But she, too, was obviously waiting on his opinion. "I agree fully with all that has just been said — ahem — " It was indeed fortunate that no one asked him what it was that had just been said. "I ran into Caleb — Mister Hone on the street. He didn't know what Wolfgang had done — was as flabbergasted as all the rest of us — more so, I should — "

"The Janke boy didn't *write* it!" Cousin Nathalia declared dryly. "And who of *us* is flabbergasted? *I* certainly am not — "

"No, Miss Nathalia, never *you!* I meant everybody thinks some things aren't — that is shouldn't be — "

"Such as that ridiculously unwarranted statement about poor Laurine's 'peremptory demands' ruining Jed's life?" Miss Carietta

came in firmly. "Will someone kindly tell Mister Hone — when he can be located! — that Jed's life is *not* ruined?"

Mister Lane's jaw dropped: Miss Carietta hadn't ever considered the possibility it was she Caleb had meant! "I certainly will, ma'am," he concluded lamely.

"The next thing we know, Mister Lane, Jed here will be asking us to overlook the fact that Mister Hone tucked tail and ran like the Yankee he is, like a — a — "

Miss Carietta subsided into a silent search for an epithet powerful enough without being too powerful for her to use. As the only representative of the arts present, Miss Nathalia was unable to remain silent any longer. "It was *gauche* of him, that's what it was — *gauche!*" She had the ball of conversation and was running with it. "Perhaps, I should explain what I mean by the word in this — "

"We agree fully, Cousin Nathalia. Now, Stacey, you were saying — ?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Milly. Poor Caleb was — desperate — although he don't show his feelings like we do. Asked me just before he left if he ought to get out a combined explanation, retraction and — er — apology. I might be wrong, but I told him 'No, just let the thing blow itself out, Caleb.' That's what I told him: 'Just let the thing blow — '"

"Sweet of you!" Miss Carietta had for the time being put the flurry with Miss Nathalia out of her mind. "You have every right to resent everything he said about Nanette."

"He didn't say a word that isn't true! Nanette has a lot to put up with, but if this'll make her stop her — er — some of her — ways, it'll be a good thing."

"Think it *will*, Mister Lane?" Jed asked matter-of-factly.

"No — nothing will. Heh-heh! Caleb kind of took a swipe at you two, too, didn't he?"

"Did kind of lace into *me!*" Jed uncrossed his knees and tilted calmly back in the Regency chair. Miss Milly clenched her hands in black skirt-folds to suppress a shriek when delicately carved walnut legs should splinter. "But like you said — a minute ago — it was every word true, and — " He, too, had heard the low gasps. His magnificent brown eyes swung to what had caused them. Trina's face pale before was ghastly now, every scintilla of pride torn from her by his admission. He hadn't meant to do that. It was nothing she didn't already know. But in being fair to Caleb before these others he had destroyed the little fictions by which she lived before others. "Now, Trina!" Not often in his life had Jed Hadyn been seen at a loss how to continue. It was painful to witness his search for some way to lessen a hurt that, for all his wildness, he would never have caused

deliberately, "It was sure funny — the way the town took it, I mean. Folks that haven't looked at a paper since Garfield was assassinated read every word and then started over, afraid they'd missed something about somebody they don't like. It now seems that all those included should feel complimented for being considered important enough — "

"The humor and flattery of the situation escape me — *quite!*"

"Want me to explain, Cousin Nathalia?"

"I do *not*, Jedediah."

"All right — all right!" His effort toward lightness had been ignominiously thwarted. "Marshall, have you any — suggestions?"

All eyes moved to the tired face, saw knuckles as so many white spots clenching at his chair seat. "I — I don't think I have — one coming. I thought at first we oughter ride Caleb Hone out of town on a rail — but all he did was put down his thoughts, and that's no crime. Printing them wasn't his fault. Wolfgang's joined the Navy. But everyone — you all, too, I guess — wants an answer to the same question. I'll save you the — embarrassment of asking. I haven't killed *anybody!* I've no idea whether *she's* dead or alive. But denials, bringing suit for libel — things like that would only make some more sure I am guilty. Caleb's thoughts in print have stirred up personal — reactions we won't see the end of in our lifetimes, but what harm's done is done. Jed's got the right idea: Let's forget it."

Feminine spines stiffened abruptly. Not a word was added.

Jed was sweating to get away. It was strange that out of all those present the only new hurt had been to the most innocent of them all. The time had come to end this stupid, self-conscious gathering. It should never have been held. Without explanation, he eased a coldly furious Miss Nathalia up from the chair into which she had settled for the evening. "Good night, ladies and gentlemen. Trina must be in bed early — doctor's orders — " Others were anxious to leave, too.

Miss Milly and her boy, left alone, straightened the room, replacing every moved chair back in its appointed place and position. It had been a little disappointing. But the two of them alone like this was better by far. She looked up from never-empty darning basket. "What's the matter, precious?"

"Everybody got to say all they wanted to but — *me*."

"Why *didn't* you let Mother know? We'd all have been so glad to have your — ideas. What was it you wanted to say — tell Mother."

"I didn't — want to *tell* anything. I wanted to ask Mister Marshall something I've been meaning to — but never think of it when I see him, not until after he's gone. It's about fishing in the Big Swimming Hole near his house."

"Yes, dear?" She got her thread and needle to work. "Tell Mother and *she'll* ask him."

"I always fish on this side. Everybody I know does. But Miss Moira fishes on the *other* side. I want to know if she catches many."

"Aren't you mistaken, dear. I doubt if Miss Moira has fished in twenty years."

"Yes'm, she *has*. I saw her row over there just the other day — no, it was longer ago than that. It was the same day I saw a lady in a blue dress walking along the edge of the Bluff — didn't I tell you?"

"No, dear, you didn't."

"I told *somebody*. I know I did, because I was in a hurry to leave and lost my last fish trying to make out who it — I know! It was Splice Rogan I told — Oh, you've stuck the needle way *in* your finger — "

"Never mind, dear." She took a long time to staunch the meager flow of blood. "Wasn't the afternoon you saw Miss Moira — fishing a long time — several weeks *after* the time you saw the lady in the blue dress? Think carefully, dear — now, wasn't it?"

"I guess so. You'll find out about what Miss Moira caught on the other side — ?"

"The first thing in the morning — my dear."

"Ask her if *she* saw the lady in the blue — "

"No, dear. You remember that story you liked so much I read you — *Wuthering Heights!* There was a lady in that walking on the moors with the wind blowing — "

"I bet that *was* what I got mixed up with. I'll tell Splice I was wrong — he's real nice to me now."

"Thanks to your Cousin Carietta! No, dear, *no!* There's no point to admitting you were wrong — to a Rogan."

"Nelia!" the voice was as tender as a natural asperity would permit, "don't you love your Cousin Nathalia any more?"

The child ran to throw her arms around the thin neck with such force that one of the cloth cherries on old boudoir cap shook loose, rolled into a corner. "I love — ev'ybody in the *whole* world — "

"Then — " considerably mollified by the rough show of affection, " — why, for pity's sake, do you want to drag all your things away from the tree where they belong — "

"Oh, let her, Cousin Nathalia!" Trina in a loose, gray wrapper sat leaning toward the small grate fire in the front parlor, although this Christmas was no more chilly than some early spring mornings. "I used to want to get off alone — so I could *feel* my presents —"

"But you were always such a—" she had almost said "peculiar," "—smart little thing. But Nelia—hmm!"

"I made *one* 'hund'ed,'" Nelia defended herself. "Week before school turned out."

"You certainly did." Miss Nathalia had not lost sight of the fact that instead of putting down the Christmas presents she had in her arms, Nelia was gathering up the rest. "And in what, pray?"

"Miss Jewel says Drawing's important as anything else. If it wasn't, she wouldn't stay after school to help me."

"So? A *lot* her art has got for Jewel Kerens! I know of two fair-to-good matrimonial chances she turned down to go No'th to study ar-r-rt—not that getting married is the *only* thing in the world! Nelia, are you going to put those things back where they belong or must I—"

"Let her alone—please!" Trina pushed up painfully from her chair and stood between the two of them. "You'll come back in a little while, won't you, honey?"

"Yes, oh, *yes*. Trina, I love you—Cousin Nathalia, too—ev'y-body!" Leaving only the too-bulky new blackboard stand, she ran heavily loaded from the room.

"You, Nelia!" Remembering, Nelia shut the door behind her with a foot.

Her room she had left so cold an hour before was warm now. A small grate fire was burning cheerful yellows and oranges and blues. Where Nelia wore a pink flannelette wrapper with her rich brown hair in kid-curlers, the little mulatto was dully dressed in pink-checked gingham. Her small head was a mass of tight plaits that stretched her scalp in accurate squares.

"Hello!" Nelia turned to hide her presents. They had to be revealed dramatically, one by one. "I heard you slip up the stairs. How'd you get over so soo-oon?"

"Miz Ca'ietta's feelin' po'ly—leastways she *say* she is!" Leah's sweet face lit from her great store of usually suppressed mischief. "An' I ask kin I bring ovah de pres-unts fer y'all."

"Who made this fire?"

"Who you reckon? I means—I did—Miz Nelia."

"Miss Nelia—?" The armful of gifts slid to the old flowered carpet of the large, high-ceiled white-plastered, white-curtained bedroom. "Oh, Leah!" Nelia threw both arms around her.

The other responded, then freed herself to extend a stockinette cap of red yarn. "Heah's yourn. I knitted hit!"

"Oh—Leah, it's—scrumpshus! Here's yours!" She climbed up to take from her bed's white tester a package wrapped in red tissue paper. "I wanted to give you some hair ribbons like mine you like

so much — but Cousin Nathalia —" she made a long camel face as best she could, "— is *so* prissy! She said I had to give you something useful. It's a sewing set."

"Thank you — Miz Nelia. How you know hit's *jus'* whut I wanted?" Automatically.

Nelia sank cross-legged to the jumble of gifts she had dropped.

"This is a bottle of Sweet Clover perfume. Smell!"

Leah sniffed deep, then rolled her eyes the way she had practiced before a calendar showing St. Cecilia at the organ. "Who's hit from?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" The other pursed her lips and tilted her head provokingly, then laughed as Leah quickly turned the card inscribed "A Merry Christmas to Nelia" over. Its reverse side was blank. "Smarty! But *I* know *who* just the same —"

"How you know?" Leah was delighted. "Kin you jus' tell by de way you feels? Mammy say whin de right 'un come along, you kin —"

"We-e-ell, not exactly. Somebody told me he was goner send it. He couldn't put his card on it, because my fam'ly *hates* him — I mean Jed does, but —" She leaned over and whispered, all the more softly for its being entirely unnecessary, "I don't care if Jed does!"

"Oo-*oo!*" Leah sat back, both hands over her mouth like Mammy did when surprised. "Ain't you 'shamed! Mistuh Jed think de sun rise an' set right squa-uh on top o' yo' haid!"

"I don't care." Kid-curlered head tossed defiantly. "He's not the boss of me! Nobody is —"

"Not even ole — I means *Miz* Camel Face?'

Both giggled, tilting forward into each other's arms — only to draw apart slowly. They weren't to embrace so "familiarly" any more, big girls now.

"Whut's dis un'?" Leah got back to Nelia's gifts in a hurry.

"New stockings to wear tonight to — Oh!"

"Oh!" Both were struck dumb with unhappiness. "Whut's dis un'?"

"Some more sachet bags from Aunt Milly. You want 'em? Every drawer in my dresser smells like ole orris root already."

"Oh, no, I couldn't. But dey is kinda pritty." A creamy hand dangled the cluster of lavender strawberries over her head, then smelled them. "Miz Milly has to make all de pres-unts she give now."

"Wish she'd give me something else. Pretty soon people'll be saying 'I smell orris root, must be old Nelia Hadyn!'" Giggles cascaded out and all about them. "Ss-ssh, Leah! *She'll* hear us, and send Trina up to make me come back down. She's nearly worried poor Trina to death since something came out in the paper. You ever find out what?"

"Not much — Miz Ca'ietta, she hid hit 'tween her mattresses. I found hit yestiddy makin' up her bed, but she kotched me jus' as I got started good. She can sho' whup."

"An out-rage!" For days Nelia had been looking for a place to use Cousin Nathalia's current favorite.

"Miss Trina would tell you. No, she wouldn't, not if Marse Jed's laid down de law. Has he?"

Nelia nodded vigorously, then feeling the wind from a tall, rattling window, she got up only to sit back down. "Leah — put some more wood on the fire!"

"Who was yo' suh-vant —" Leah was lost in the directions of a new game, "— dis time las' yeah?"

Nelia sat back, more than a little like Miss Nathalia. "Leah Smith! I told you to put wood on the fire!"

Mulatto skin lost all its under-color. Leah got up and laid two small logs of wood on the others. "Anything else yuh wants me ter do?" She spoke very low. "— Miz Nelia."

"Course not, silly!" Nelia dived forward on her stomach and elbows. "Bet I can beat you at that game you been reading —"

"I — I gotter be gettin' back ter — ter do sump'n fer Miz Ca'ietta. She say ter wish y'all a Merry Chris —" Unable to finish, she slipped out of the door, shut it softly. She wanted to slam it, wanted to fall across a chair, a bed, anything — and just die.

Nelia sat motionless on the floor. She'd done as Cousin Nathalia had told her. Now she was crying, was miserable. She scattered her presents with one slippered kick and in sudden nastiness spit on the two offending logs. From the window which looked up West Fourth Street, she could see Leah. She was crossing South Reardon fast, head tucked down.

Nelia flung open her door, left it open. She ran down the front stair, left the front door open, too. She didn't even answer to the "Nelia! Nelia, *you* hear me! Nelia *Hadyn* — come back here this instant!" Old Camel Face could keep on.

Down the graveled walk she ran in white gown, pink bathrobe streaming out. Under the gate's scrollwork arch, she lifted nightgown above her knees, to run faster.

She glimpsed Leah up by Storrow Wood, across Fourth from the Fire Department. "Leah — stop!" She didn't. Nelia knew Leah could outrun her if she wanted to. She let herself be caught in both arms. "I'm sorry, Leah. Please, make up with me! I was just doing like they told me to. I love you more'n I do them."

Leah was crying, too, the best kind of crying, the kind when you're happy. "If you hadn't come aftuh me — I would'a jus' died!"

"Oh, me! Oh, my! Oh, my-y!" Derision came in high faked falsetto

from in front of the fire house. The girls let go of each other. After one look, both grabbed up handfuls of sticks from the edge of the wood and began throwing them. They pelted against the fire-house windows.

"Eee-yah-yanh! Never touched me!" Splice Rogan was jumping about in delight. "Never touched — Damn!"

One of the firemen had opened an upstairs dormitory window and doused Splice with a wash bowl of soapy water. "The first Christmas Day in five years we ain't been called out on a false alarm — and you young chipmunks got to come waking us up. Git, Splice Rogan, before I *start* a fire in the seat of your breeches! And you two — across the street! Git!" The window slammed down.

Splice was slinking off with mumbled threats of what his father would do, looking back and pulling his wet pants out from between his fat legs just like — just like he'd — Nelia and Leah became one again in a torrent of giggles.

"Be in by 'leven, Tammy!" Mama gave his front cowlick another pat that did no good. "Remember everything I — "

"Yes'm!" He was excited but trying to cover up by teasing. "It's the first time I ever been asked up to *Hadyn* Hill — and — and I won't be again if I don't bee-have — and I'm to tell old Camel Face I had a nice — "

"Tammas Lipscomb!"

He danced side to side like a prize fighter, tauntingly.

"All right, young man — you're just trying yourself, and the first thing you know all the party *you'll* have will be right *here*."

"Aw-ooh!" He pretended to cry with great movie-star chest-heaves. When he could make Mama laugh, she gave up. She was laughing now. He could leave, couldn't have if her feelings had been really hurt.

He took their low fence at a running jump, slowed to a very sedate walk when she called, "Walk, Tam, *walk*. You'll get there so hot nobody'll know I've had you in soak all day." She was still calling instructions when he passed out of hearing in the darkness of South Hadyn.

Moira made to turn back inside the amber warmth but felt herself giving way. She remained outside on the low porch sagged against the porch wall. This was not the first time she'd had a seizure like this of sobbing — far from it. This much she had learned: if she let these moments have their way, they would tire of her and pass. She would be left wrung-free of feeling, could go on.

"Moira!" Marshall spoke indifferently from behind a newspaper left at his office by a Houston dry-goods salesman. It was two days old, but Sironia didn't have any paper of its own right now. "If you're going to stay outside, get a coat." He turned the large, yellowish sheets. "Either way — close the door."

She came in slowly, shut the door. Even had he been watching, he could not have seen her face pale above brown serge.

After a minute or two, she took the rocker across machine-woven "tapestry" scarf which held "the big lamp." She held up an embroidered blue sack she was working tiny buttonholes into, blue on blue to see where she'd left off. Once started, she worked quickly. The more she forced herself to think about what she was doing, the fewer other thoughts would intrude. And she did want this sack to be extra nice — for Trina's baby. In faint malice, she never called it Jed Hadyn's baby to herself, because that "wouldn't be very *definite*." Every stitch had to be perfect. Her eyes tired more easily now. To rest them she'd hold the short little coat up every few minutes and shake it. The prickling inside her lids would ease and she'd go back to the delicate work.

Each such interval, she looked at her husband's lamplit profile. Thinner than a year ago, it was like an Indian's in its spareness, in deep-cut lines down from thin nostrils. Black hair was no less thick but much grayer, as were the heavy sideburns he was wearing shorter and shorter every year. Was he trimming them so as to hide their gray, look younger? Why wouldn't he tell her he was sick with worry? Why wouldn't he even give her a chance to help him? If he had any respect at all for her commonsense, she could say: Mister Lipscomb, we can't keep on like — like it's been ever since the last time *she* came to town. When you got home that night moving like a sleepwalker, too worn out to hide all that money in hundred-dollar bills very well, *why* didn't you tell me — ?

She had to put the tiny sack down hurriedly lest her hands rip it to ragged blue strings. She moved around the room, straightening the lamp shade, picking up a piece of lint. Once she slapped a fluttering moth sharply between her palms. Not even then did he look up. She wished now she had "accepted," as Trina had begged, to sit with the other mothers. No, she didn't: Tam was getting to that age where it would make him feel too much a baby. If only she *could* keep him a baby! Keep him always just as he was, never growing up and learning — things. Always depending on her as he did now —

"Can't you sit down, Moira? If you want to walk, get your coat and go back outside."

"I — I'm just too tired to sit still — " She laughed. That was a joke, but it hadn't been until she saw its absurdity. "Got the fidgets, I guess.

How — I wish we had ten more exactly like him — only all ages."

"A little late letting me know, aren't you?"

"It wouldn't have done any good. You didn't want — *him*."

He laid the paper down and looked up at her, could see traces of the coarse, girlish beauty that had been hers in such abundance. "No, I didn't. That is just *one* of the — mistakes your husband has made."

She stared down. Was this what she'd prayed for? She moved nearer, sank to one knee before him, a hand on each of his widespread thighs. "What were your *other* — mistakes, Mister Lipscomb?"

A hand raising toward her head paused, fell back to chair arm. "Haven't you enough troubles of your own, Moira?"

"Anything that bothers you bothers me — even if you don't think I've got enough sense to understand — "

"S-sh!" He hadn't denied it! Angry for an instant, she was already glad he hadn't lied to make her feel better. "I'd really like to finish this paper — some time tonight."

She did not rise, still looked at him hidden though he was by the paper. "It's her — Miss Garrick that's — worrying you?"

"Moira! I — I haven't seen the woman or heard from her in months!" Over lowered paper, his dark eyes chastised her fleetingly. "Is it because you *haven't?*"

"You'd still think so — no matter what I say — wouldn't you?"

"I — !" Here it was between them again, that firm, unyielding wall. When there was so much they ought to be telling each other — so very much! "Yes, I guess I would."

"Then I won't say." His shrug of muscular shoulders said the discussion was finished. She was smart enough to drop the subject. No woman could help showing in her every glance, every move, that it *wasn't* dropped. Nor was any husband better equipped to ignore it.

She brushed back thick "horsetail" hair whose white strands were plainly visible in all lights. She got up and began putting Tam's "Christmas" out of the way. There was a lot of it. Best of all was that so many of his gifts had come unexpectedly. Her boy, she just knew, was liked better than any other his age in town. By the Negroes, too.

Side by side on the floor were the oval tie clasp of gold from Charles Storrow and the little sailboat Old Fred had whittled from a piece of *bois d'arc*. Miss Milly had sent a one-volume history of the Confederacy. No card had been on a small net bag of chipped marbles. None was necessary. Tam had seen Jared use them too often, knew how he valued them.

Warm pleasure filled Moira. Tam had wanted to take all his things over to Mammy's and give Jared his choice. Mister Lipscomb had settled the matter in his Yankee-blood way. "Which of your presents do you like most, son?" That was the one — a pitcher's glove — Tam

had taken over to the cabin on River Road. His father had told Tam he would get more good from giving it than Jared from receiving it. He hadn't just been quoting from the Bible, either. It was the grand things like that a woman had to remember in her husband so hard she couldn't think about — some others. Sure and the good Lord knew what he was about when he made every man's thoughts his own. Just suppose Mister Lipscomb could even suspect what was in her mind right this minute — !

"Mama!" The front door was flung open by Tam so hard it hit the wall and shook the lamp flame. "Come quick — Miss Trina's hurt *bad*. She's a-dying and — and Miss Hazel says she's delir'ous, and you can do more with her than she can and — that's all. I run every step of the — "

Moira rushing out just as she was, felt her arm caught in a grasp from which there would never be any escape — except one way. "Calm down! I can hitch up and drive you over in half the time it'd take you to run — and you'll be able to do some good when you get there. Get whatever you want to take with you." He herded a breathlessly repeating Tam with him.

Marshall and Tam had played "fire" too often to need any directions. Tam slipped the cold bridle over old Blue's gray head and fastened the loose thro' latch under warm hairiness. Marshall threw the breeching over shaggy rump, put the almost white tail through the crupper right after the collar had gone over the neck. Tam held up the shafts and Marshall backed the old mare into them. Each fastened a trace to the single-tree. Each undid a rein dangling from the bridle, passed it through a collar ring and back over bent dashboard. Marshall fastened the checkrein and climbed in. Tam let down the two crossbars of the gate on the Reardon Street side, and swung up behind as the buggy moved out.

"Moira!" Marshall called at the front gate, then turned to Tam. "Help your maw in! All right, Moira? Giddap, Blue!"

"Tammy, tell Mama exactly what's wrong with — Oh! When'd it happen? Do the other children know — ?"

"One thing at a time, Moira. Tam, do you know what's the matter with Miss Trina?"

"No, sir!" Tam admitted with a feeling of let-down in importance. "We was playing Farmer-in-the-Dell in the front parlor. Miss Hazel asked somebody where Miss Trina had gone to. Nobody knew. Miss Nathalia run up the stairs like an ole turkey hen and — "

"Tammy! Go on — !"

" — and Miss Hazel tole us to keep playing."

"Hazel taking charge? Where were Miss Milly and Miss Carietta and — "

"They brought Charles and old fatstuff, Bessie Hicks. Nelia says

Miss Carietta and Miss Nathalia've had another 'little tiff,' she called it. Miss Milly's keeping-her-company up on Storrow Hill."

"Did Miss Milly and Miss Hazel speak to each other?"

"Moira, of all times — "

"Didn't get a chance to. Miss Hazel didn't come until after they had come and gone."

"Um — hum!" from Moira told that some ideas of her own had been confirmed. "How'd you *first* hear Miss Trina was hurt?"

"A loud squawk from Miss Nathalia from upstairs. Miss Hazel said 'What *now* — for God's sake! I mean — Go on playing, children! And then she run up the stairs like a — like a — "

"Never mind, son. All you know is she came running back down, said Miss Trina was hurt and told you to get your mother?"

"Ye-es, sir," regretfully. Having crossed the Square, they were nearing Hadyn Hill. "I 'spec she's dead by now!"

"Son, don't exaggerate — like your mother — when you don't know."

"Hm!"

"Here we are!" He drew up in the back yard of the top-heavy frame house in its grove of magnolias and hackberries. "Run on in, Moira! Son, you go back to the party — if there's any party left. I'll hitch someplace here in the back — to Jed's post. He wasn't here when you left?"

"No, sir — leastways, I didn't see him."

Marshall took down the checkrein, let soft old lips muzzle the palm of his hand warm again. "Blue, you don't have much fun — but you don't have much trouble, either."

Marshall went in the back door. In brightly lit kitchen, everything seemed covered with food — grape-juice punch in a churn — plates of damp-clothed sandwiches, layer cakes — two ice-cream freezers. Behind the wide wood stove he saw four young Negroes sitting flat on the floor, legs straight out in front of them, eyes round and white with fear.

"What you-all doing back there?"

"We don't know, suh!" It was Jared, so pale he was whiter than Tam was in the summertime. "Miss Trina's hurt ba-ad. Mammy say she goner take de hide off'n de fust one dat moves frum back heah. She will, too."

"Mammy's right. But no harm in making it easier by having some cake, is there?" He picked up a plate heaped with rich yellow and chocolate slices that looked like they could float off, given a slight shove.

Four little heads ducked sharply in silence, four pairs of eyes exchanged looks. Marshall examined them more closely. Around each mouth was evidence unmistakable. "Lemme see your hands — all of

'em!" Separately, eight little hands came into view, four empty ones first, then four with fingers clenched into hunks of Miss Milly's Dolly Varden cake.

"Hit helped keep 'em quiet, Mistuh Marshall."

"Well, eat your cake — but before you go to bed, tell Mammy what you've done, Jared."

"We aimed ter, Mistuh Marshall."

He winked and took a big piece of cake, himself. "I got to keep quiet, too." He sat down in a chair before them. As long as he had a wait coming to him, he'd rather spend it with these than with those white kids in the parlor.

Shaking his large head, he choked down the last of the cake and grinned at the eyes watching. He'd better see about the others. Up front he found Nelia's twenty or more guests in two whispering bunches. In the front parlor were all the little boys and in the back parlor all the little girls. Practically all the girls were crying — except Bessie Hicks. She was too interested in watching the little boys. Not one had any idea of leaving.

They must be got out of the way, and since none of the women upstairs was going to risk missing anything — "Get your coats, children! Tam, you stay here to run errands, if need be." Most of them obeyed quickly, a regular scramble for wraps, scarves, coats and hats. He doubted if any had all the right things — but never mind. "Line up — in twos." They obeyed, girls together and boys together — except Bessie. She'd hung on to Charles, who didn't have any close boy friend, anyway. "Everybody ready? All right, we'll escort the ones who live nearest home first and then — "

"Let's 'scort the ones who live futh'est furst!" Bessie's suggestion was popular. None right now wanted to go home ever again.

"All right — any of you live too far to walk can go with us and I'll drive you home when we get back." This was approved noisily. All wanted to be in the march around town, including Nelia! Bessie started singing a carol. The girls joined in. The boys started catcalling. Bessie burst into tears but stopped quickly when no one noticed. There was a minor outbreak when they crossed Main. One of the boys whispered loudly, "Look-ee, her draw's is slippin'!" This sent all the little girls to grabbing and then giggling in relief when they realized it wasn't true. The rest of the hour's march passed off with no more than might be expected of goosing, hair-pulling, sweetheart-teasing.

As they came back, from a block away Marshall could see all the lights still on in the Hadyn home through magnolia leaves and bare branches of hackberries. Under the ornamental iron arch at the front gate they passed still in twos and on up the front walk. Now the first

sound came from the house — a low, choked wailing. It rose and fell, never ceasing entirely. Its anguish had yellowed the lights, made the house, actually so bright, to Marshall gloomy, sinister, hateful.

There was no one in the hall nor front rooms. He could distinguish women's voices on the second floor, low and excited, all talking at the same time.

"Moira!" he called from the foot of stairs reaching unbelievably high. "Moira!"

She appeared above him. Brown serge was soaked in blood. The swollen eyes in her sickly white face were not her eyes at all. He started up. She motioned him back, felt her way down along the banister rail. For a moment she collapsed against him, then seemed to remember he wouldn't approve. With both hands behind her she leaned instead against low newel post. "Sit down, Moira, before you — Now, tell me — "

There was heavy, scraping tread from the kitchen. The back door of the hall was flung open.

"Jed!" Marshall waved Moira aside, and went to the man whose giant shadow was on the wall behind him. Man and shadow were swaying in spite of bracing feet spread wide.

"Well, here I am! Where's the *party?*" Sagged lips smiled foolishly. "I said — ic — *here* I am. Strike up the band!"

"S-sh!" Moira was with them now, motioning Marshall to help her get Jed into the back hall and the door closed.

"Listen, Jed!" Marshall had shaken temporary understanding into many a besotted mind. Graying black head rolled until teeth clicked. "Listen! Trina's *hurt!*"

"Trina? Hurt? Get your hands off me, Lipscomb!" Drunkenness had bared old feeling. Marshall's jaw squared in anger as Moira recoiled, both hands over her mouth. "Get your hands off me! I can't very well ask you-all to leave my home — " It seemed he would fall this time, since neither made any attempt to steady him, but he caught on the old hatrack the Negroes used, hung swaying. " — but you'll excuse *me,* I am sure. I must see my wife. She's ill — or so I'm told!"

Marshall felt as cold as ice, his voice sounded as hard. "Trina is hurt — seriously — "

"*Can't* be! Fine when I left about an — whenever it was!"

Moira stepped between. "She's had a fall, a *bad* fall, Jed." She lowered her face: neither must see the horror those words brought. "Jed, listen to *me* — please. Trina went up in the attic — by herself — and coming back down, a heel caught in the rug at top of those steep attic stairs. It's — *still* caught there. She fell *all* the way down. No one heard — the children down here were making so much noise.

By the time — the others missed her — and went to see — she had lost so much blood — It would probably have been fatal even for a woman *not* in her condition — "

"'Her condition'?" As so often before, he had sobered with astounding suddenness. "That's impossible. Couldn't be! I'm going up to her — "

"Not yet, Jed!"

"Get out of my way or — "

"Jed! They're *both* — gone!"

That literally flung him about facing her. "Moira, you don't mean that — Oh — oh — " He crumpled to his knees. His jaw was clenched in white hands as if to crush it.

Marshall trying to calm him was struck viciously. He seized hold again, slammed Jed around on the old hatrack seat. "Cut it out! All this Hadyn carrying-on will only make things worse. Damn you! Hit me again like that and I'll beat the hell out of you — and, the shape you're in, it won't take me long."

If Jed felt the humiliation of being so spoken to, being shoved back on the seat again, he didn't show it. He didn't show anything. Marshall feared for a minute he had used too much force, but let his mouth curl as Jed reached back to pull out a flask a quarter full. He drained it. About to leap up, he saw Moira under the hall light. His eyes dilated.

"On your dress there — *her* blood?"

Even as Moira nodded he leaped up beating his face with his fists, then stopped as suddenly as he had begun. He looked wildly about. His eyes came to the kitchen door. He plunged toward it.

Marshall trying to stop him was thrown aside by a single blow on his chest, saw only the swirl of shadows which took Jed through the house and out into darkness.

"Mister Lipscomb, we've *got* to stop him! You saw his eyes. He'll do something awful — like his father. I *know* he will. *They* always do the same things over and over. Stop him, stop him — *somebody!*"